

# Synod Moderators' Report to General Assembly 2021

*Revd Ruth Whitehead - on behalf of the Synod Moderators of the United Reformed Church.*



As the group of Moderators welcomes new members and all the gifts they bring, as well as thanking those who have ceased to travel with us, we ask ourselves the question – where are we?

We are in decline as a denomination in the UK – and we know we are not alone in that sense that our numbers are falling and our structures are creaking.

We are still in the midst of a Global pandemic which has brought even more rapid change to so many aspects of life and has brought havoc and tragedy to many people. We know that our churches and our ministers are tired and they're hurting.

So, as the traditional funeral service words say, 'in the midst of life we are in death'.

These are liminal times, between times. Richard Rohr's description of liminal space is "...a unique position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them ... It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer.

If you are not trained in how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing."

Liminal time are like a threshold – as we move from one state to another, we recognise the change and pause in the space.

Or we can describe liminal times as like being in the fog – we can't see clearly where to go.

The fog seems thick, and like a driver in thick fog we need to slow right down and peer hard into the space around us. This is not the time to panic, or put the headlights on full beam, or slam our foot to the floor and hope for the best. But nor is it a time to give up, put on the hazard-warning lights, curl under the blanket and hope for the best.

Liminal times are like pupation. Like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, we know we are changing, and that change is inevitable, but right now it's hard to see the way forward.

It's time to breathe, pray, and recognise the liminal times for what they are.

In liminal times we need to:

- Be prepared to wait
- Deepen our communal discernment
- Shape our institutional memory
- Clarify our purpose
- See the way forward emerge

How do we do each of these things?

We need to be prepared to wait – don't panic and rush to a 'solution'

We need to Deepen our communal discernment – listen for God together in the Bible, in prayer and in one another

We need to Shape our institutional memory – tell our story and remember who we were, who we are, and what our deepest guiding values are as the people of the triune God

We need to Clarify our purpose – to ask who God, who is Father Son and Holy Spirit, wants God's church to be now and next, as an expression of God's love for the world.

We hope to See way forward emerging – look for signs of green shoots of new life and new ways in God, emerging from the chaos.

In the book of reports there are examples of people engaging in each of these phases. The Synod Moderators hope local churches and other gatherings of God's people will explore your own response to liminal times together, perhaps using the questions to help you.

Our greatest need in these liminal times is to trust God for wisdom. We may feel we are on our backs. We may long to get to our feet.

But right now, we need to be on our knees, in prayer and in trust.

To return us to the funeral service and words from Deuteronomy "The eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms".