Guidelines for Receiving ‘Migrant’ Churches

The United Reformed Church is a Multicultural Church! The Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry Committee believes this to be a reality recognised by our ‘Catch the Vision Statement’ as it calls on our churches to respond faithfully to the call to be diverse, inclusive and flexible. Minority ethnic Christians are growing, and new migrant churches are very much part of that vibrant growth. Already we have the Ghanaian churches in London that are linked to the URC through our Ghanaian Ministry. We also have our URC Urdu-speaking congregations, and several URC Korean services in different parts of the UK.

The Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry Committee seeks to equip the URC to take seriously the meaning of being a church that is truly multicultural. We believe that being church in the 21st century is to be multicultural, and this means rejoicing in and embracing cultural diversity and the rich opportunities they bring for the mission and ministry of the whole church. We are convinced that for our church to be a vibrant and sustainable Christian community in the next ten years, we must be more intentional about being visibly multicultural and living multi-culturally. We need to be more proactive about becoming churches that welcome all people, treating them with care and hospitality. We believe that the URC is called to be a sign and witness to our Lord's healing and reconciling power in a wounded world. We therefore seek to equip our churches to become centers of hospitality, justice and reconciliation – i.e. to become churches that are truly multicultural. How we welcome new migrant churches is crucial to this process, hence the following guidelines:

It is critical that in seeking to be a multicultural church we judge all our procedures by the test – Does this express the welcome that Christ offers to all who seek him? This means that we may need to be less rigid and legalistic in our thinking where minority ethnic and new migrant churches are concerned, if we are to be faithful to the call to be diverse and lively, inclusive and flexible.

1. Preliminary Questions
When a migrant congregation seeks entry, some preliminary and key questions need to be asked:
• Are they a settled and permanent group;
• Is their worship open to people of all races;
• Is their faith in agreement with our Basis of Union;
• Do they seriously desire to be in fellowship and mutual oversight with our neighbouring congregations and/or local ecumenical partners.
2. Educational Programme
(i) If responses to the above are all affirmative, then the process of receiving the new congregation begins in the spirit of open-armed welcome! That is, we must make clear at this point that the new congregation is very welcome, and that as part of us an educational and orientation programme for the new group to understand our church and ministry better must be carried out. The Secretary for Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry and District Council must work together on the educational tasks from the outset. Other Assembly staff and committees must be consulted where relevant.
(ii) The local 'host' church must also participate in the educational process as they too need to understand the ministry and culture of the new congregation better. District Council and the Secretary for Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry must consult on appropriate cross-cultural awareness training for this group.

3. Leadership
When we welcome and receive a new congregation, we need to recognise their leadership, whether lay or ordained. We need a way to formally recognise any lay or ordained leadership the group might have. This is critical for the transitional period, but also for the long-term survival of the new congregation. The Secretary for Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry must consult with the Secretaries for Ministries, Training, and Ecumenical Relations to devise a system of formal recognition of minority ethnic leadership as part of this guideline.

4. Property Sharing
It is important from the outset that each congregation involved, both 'host' and new, be encouraged to see the issue of sharing property in terms of a conscious, specific mission strategy of a multicultural church. It is important that the Secretary for Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry and District Council facilitate the forming of a written agreement for this relationship. Such an agreement should accord rights of usage, an appropriate sharing of costs and responsibilities, taking into account the ministry needs. The process of forming this agreement should recognise the equality of the groups as they share in mission as communities in the service of Christ through this Church. The agreement or covenant should make clear that where possible priority of use are given to the congregations before any outside group; sharing of property is not based on rental or tenancy agreement; each congregation share in the cost of repairs, maintenance and service charges in an equitable manner; decisions on property issues must be representative.

There may be cases where property transfer between congregations occur, or where purchase/sale of property takes place. More detailed guidelines need to be provided for them. What is vital is that both groups understand that property is resource for mission, and that their agreement should foster the mission and growth of the church as a whole, not hinder.

5. Relationship to Home Church
Multicultural Ministry is striving to establish a true unity in diversity - a harmonious sharing of life with people from different cultural traditions in one church/community. We emphasise the concepts of 'respect of each culture' and 'sharing life' as core values. We strive to welcome new migrant congregations with respect and love. But we are clear that
our focus is right here in the UK, enabling and empowering minority ethnic members to be full and equal members of our church. The URC needs to reflect in its mission and life the world church that is right here in our midst. Our commitment to multicultural ministry affirms the Council for World Mission model of mission which states that God’s mission is global and we are all partners in it. Further, we want to emphasise our commitment to multicultural ministry as a ministry in its own right with a particular focus on mission right here in the UK. We therefore need to be clear that when we are receiving new migrant congregations they become fully part of us. As such they are governed by the URC rules and regulations, and are officially members of the URC.

From the outset we need to make a clear distinction between 'maintaining cultural traditions' and 'maintaining home-church tradition'. Confusing the two is not helpful for developing a truly multicultural URC, and our overseas church partner relationships may complicate this issue for us if we are not aware of this distinction. Our welcoming, if done properly, should be sufficient in helping to build mutual trust and respect, so that there should be no necessity to involve the homeland church in how we develop multicultural ministry here in the UK, except as a matter of courtesy where the need may arise, or in the case of ecumenical partnerships, follow the procedures established for Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

6. Generational Issues
There are two generations involved here, the first and the second and later generations. It is vital that the ministry of migrant churches put some emphasis on Christian education for all these generations, respecting the concerns of each generation with a particular focus on those growing up and being educated in the UK. Done with wisdom and sensitivity the emerging generations can serve as a bridge between the different cultures in this context.

7. Models of Multicultural Church
We need to respond appropriately to the call to be inclusive and flexible. This means being open to different models of being church. Trust and friendship can take time to develop. Two congregations worshipping at different times in different languages but with a single church/elders council meeting is one model. A multicultural/mixed congregation where two or more groups merge into one is another model. Because of the different needs of the generations in migrant churches, we may need to allow for different language services. For example, there may be a youth service in English for the 2nd generation minority ethnic people, who may prefer English to their mother tongue. Indeed, young people from both groups may join this service together, thereby establishing a multicultural youth service. The important point is that there can be different models in the one church. Such diversity can thrive and be affirmed within the framework of the URC as the home to all these groups - as the manifest body of Christ who unites us all. The implied emphasis here is an assertion of our identity as the United Reformed Church, which is a certainty of belonging and ownership that new migrant groups particularly need as they establish roots in a new context. This need not compromise our commitment to ecumenism.

8. Inauguration/Model Constitution
When levels of satisfaction for all parties are adequate and such satisfaction is clearly expressed, then there should be a formal ceremony of welcoming and receiving the new
congregation into the URC. An Inaugural Service led by District Council in consultation with the Secretary for Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry and the new group(s) may be planned. Such a service similar to an induction/commissioning service may include the handing over of the new congregation's roll to the District; a symbolic acceptance or affirmation by the parties involved (i.e. the new congregation, the host congregation etc..) of their property sharing agreement; the adoption of and commitment the 'Model Constitution for a Local Congregation of the URC' ¹ by the parties involved. It is important that in such an Inaugural Service, the new congregation is properly enabled to have its say in what happens and that the 'host' congregation also is included. Often the new congregation would want someone from their own ethnic leadership to play a key role (e.g. preaching) on the day.

It is important to note that while the process leading to this important event may have taken some months and therefore it was a lengthy journey, this inauguration event needs to be recognized as the beginning of another phase of the journey where friendship, goodwill, and patience must be encouraged and the groups/parties embark together on this exciting and enriching journey of mission and authentic witness to the saving grace of our Lord.

RJMM - Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry
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¹ Available from the Racial Justice & Multicultural Ministry Office
C:\Documents and Settings\rjmm.pa@urc\Local Settings\Temporary Internet Files\OLK2\Guidelines Minority Ethnic - Migrant Churches.doc