

# Paper N2

## Initial update from the Church Life Review

### Church Life Review Group

#### Basic information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	The General Secretary <a href="mailto:john.bradbury@urc.org.uk">john.bradbury@urc.org.uk</a>
<b>Action required</b>	Discussion and decision.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) <b>Assembly Executive welcomes the initial report of the Church Life Review Group, and affirms its direction of travel.</b></li><li>2) <b>Assembly Executive affirms the proposal to engage in partnership with <i>Theos</i> to undertake research into the identity, hopes, dreams and expectations of local congregations within the United Reformed Church.</b></li><li>3) <b>Assembly Executive affirms the proposal to work with Moore Kingston Smith to analyse income, expenditure and capital across the family of the General Assembly and the synods. It encourages all parts of the United Reformed Church to engage positively in this process.</b></li><li>4) <b>Assembly Executive requests the General Secretariat to engage in a quick review of present structures and bring proposals to General Assembly 2022 for any immediate rationalisation that might be possible.</b></li></ol>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To update the Assembly Executive on the initial thinking of the Church Life Review Group following its initial meeting held on 25-27 October 2021.
<b>Main points</b>	<p>The Church Life Review Group believes that faithful response to the gospel call of God requires us to face squarely the many challenges the United Reformed Church faces. There are primarily:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions surrounding our identity and our discipleship.</li><li>• The significant decline of people, particularly in terms of volunteers and ministers.</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A significant lack of clarity about the overall financial functioning of the family of the United Reformed Church.</li> <li>• An oversized General Assembly Committee Structure and a Church House staffing structure that does not neatly align with that Committee Structure.</li> </ul> <p>It proposes two pieces of partnership research work:            With the think-tank <i>Theos</i>, to engage in careful qualitative research involving careful listening to a representative sample of local churches to understand their identity, hopes and dreams, the barriers to their realisation, and their understanding of what they need from the wider church.            A piece of financial research work with Moore Kingston Smith to analyse the income, expenditure and assets of the family of the United Reformed Church, to fully understand our financial situation, seek potential economies of scale, to enable better support of local congregations and new pieces of mission work in the longer term.</p> <p>There are four pieces of in-house work we intend to pursue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To ask the General Secretariat to make a quick, provisional review of our structures to see where immediate rationalisations might be made, pending longer-term work.</li> <li>• To begin a process to reflect on theology and money, and the underlying biblical and theological principles that shape the way we believe we are called to use our resources as the family of the United Reformed Church.</li> <li>• To initiate a piece of work that might lead to a clear definition of the minimum requirements for a local church to be able to function as such, along with possible solutions where that minimum cannot be met.</li> <li>• To pursue, over time, a range of more <i>ad hoc</i> initiatives that might act as accelerants to the flourishing of the whole United Reformed Church.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Consultation has taken place with...</b></p>	

## Summary of impact

<p><b>Financial</b></p>	<p>The working of the CLR Group has been accounted for within the budget. It is proposed to fund the research work from a restricted fund with considerable accumulated unspent income which is at the discretion of the General Secretary. This means we need not spend from the M&amp;M fund for this work, or draw on general church reserves.</p>
<p><b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b></p>	

## Introduction

1. **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love”.** (Ephesians 1: 3-4).
2. We are the Church by the grace of God. As St Paul writes to the young and divided church in Ephesus he reminds them that their calling finds its origin before creation itself. He goes on to point them to the reality that God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesus.1: 10). Our call to be the People of God, the body of Christ, in the corner of space and time the United Reformed Church finds itself serving, is one we must respond to with faithfulness. It is not one we must respond to thinking that the future of Christ’s work within creation depends on our human efforts or plans. Church review processes can suffer from a ‘saviour complex’ – that we must find the mission plan or strategy that will save the church as we know it. That is not our task. Our task is simple faithfulness to God as disciples of Jesus Christ. The life of the church ultimately rests in God’s hands.
3. St Paul prays for the Church in Ephesus that they will be given “a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know [Christ], so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which [Christ] has called you”. That prayer is our prayer too. The task ahead of the church in the next few years is significant. Wisdom requires us to take seriously the challenges and issues that we face. We do that precisely because that is how we honour the hope to which God has called us. That hope is universal in scope – it is a hope offered to the whole of creation. Bearing witness to that good news is our primary task as a church. Being disciples is to follow the One who offers us that hope more faithfully. This call must frame all that we do.
4. “For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us”. One theme that kept returning in our reflections was that of trust, or rather, the lack of trust. We notice this throughout the life of the United Reformed Church. Local churches distrust synods, who can seem distant and unaccountable. Synods distrust the General Assembly of the Church. Church House seems distant, and yet another source of arbitrary decision making. There is mistrust between wealthy synods and synods lacking resources. Trust can be swiftly lost, and only slowly gained. Trust is won when we understand one another as siblings in Christ, when we are transparent and honest about the pressures that we are all facing, when decisions are taken openly, and wherever possible within the councils of the church itself. It seems to us imperative that we all seek to live together in ways that build trust. We need to find honesty to articulate when trust is lacking, and have the patience to seek to address that transparently. Good communication is always going to be at the heart of trust. Any process of Church Life Review will only ever be as effective as the levels of trust and communication that surround it. We will seek to do what we can as a group to develop trust and constructive relationships, but we draw the attention of the church to the need for all of us to attend to this.

5. The Church Life Review group met for the first time in person and residentially at the end of October 2021. Our reflections were framed by abiding with the opening chapters of Ephesians, which is perhaps the most profound and sustained reflection on the life of the church the New Testament offers us. The scale of the task before us is immense. There are elements of it which are about catching visions and dreaming dreams, and particularly listening to the hopes and dreams of the front-line of the work of the church. Part of the challenge is about resources: stipendiary ministry becomes scarce and thinly spread; the pool of volunteer service that has been bedrock of our tradition is drying up; and we are a long way from being able to make strategic, informed decisions about our finances as the whole of the United Reformed Church. Our structures are over-blown for the size of organisation we now are, and sometimes restrict us from being able to move swiftly to respond to the change we are constantly living with, and becomes increasingly difficult to populate.
6. Part of responding to the challenges we face wisely is to recognise what is possible, and what is not possible, and the timescale to which we can work. Our work is looking to the medium and longer term. There are massive pressures that we face now, that we cannot immediately resolve. We envisage bringing thinking and ideas to General Assembly 2022, more substantive resolutions to Assembly in 2023 and 2024. Any constitutional changes take two Assemblies to make their way through the councils of the church, therefore it may be 2024-25 before much substantive change can be seen. Obviously day-to-day decisions about practical matters such as deployment and budgeting have to continue to be made whilst this wider work continues. We would encourage the church not to put off all decision making in the meantime.

### **The challenges before us**

7. The context of the Covid-19 pandemic has heightened that sense that all is not well. One of the difficulties we face, which surrounds all other issues at the moment, is that we do not know how much of what we are experiencing in this precise moment is about the impact of the pandemic, and how much represents a 'new normal' already. Only time will reveal that, but in the meantime we must attend to the issues that we know we face. We identify four themes within the challenges we face:
8. **Identity and discipleship**
  - i. We notice that our life as a church can sometimes feel unbalanced. If we reflect upon the five 'Marks of Mission', in general the United Reformed Church tends towards responding to human need by loving service, transforming the unjust structures of society and sustaining the integrity of creation. The work of the United Reformed Church tends less to proclaiming the good news, teaching the faith and baptising new believers. We warmly welcome the decision that Missional Discipleship needs to be embedded within the whole work of the church, rather than being at risk of being seen as a 'programme', which has been the danger with *Walking the Way: living the life of Jesus today*. What *Walking the Way* has pointed us to is the continued need to become more confident in Evangelism, and the teaching of our faith.

It is our conviction as the United Reformed Church that the core front line of mission are our local congregations. There are other 'front lines' such as URC Youth, the Daily Devotions and Daily Devotions Sunday Service, or churchwide groups such as GEAR. These may, in a network society, become more significant over time, but local congregations form the backbone of the United Reformed Church.

- ii. **We don't believe that the United Reformed Church as a whole can or should develop some kind of 'mission strategy'. The forms of worship, witness, evangelism and service that are called for in any one context can only be successfully determined in that context. We believe we are better to concentrate on how the wider church best resources those front-lines of mission, rather than attempt to pre-determine what local churches should be doing.**
- iii. We do believe we should be alert to issues of our identity, and those things that give us a sense of who we are and what our vocation is as the United Reformed Church. That must express itself differently in different contexts but yet a clearer sense of who we collectively are as the United Reformed Church helps us better fulfil our vocation.

### 9. People

- i. Local churches are rapidly running out of people to carry responsibility. Anecdotally it is clear from what synods report that the majority of churches that close do so because they can no longer find people able to sustain the practical running of a congregation. Far less often is it because they have run out of money. This is also linked with a significant increase in the burden of codification and external scrutiny of the compliance faced by congregations.
- ii. Synods struggle to find volunteers to take on responsibilities. There has been a massive expansion of staffing numbers in synods and Synod Trusts over the 50-year life of the URC. Much of this is because the pool of volunteers who helped resource our work with finance, buildings, legal matters and the like has dried up, coupled with the increasing need for the professionalisation of these functions. Indeed, we may need to examine whether relying on volunteers for certain roles is actually the most effective and efficient way of supporting church life. Many synods find it increasingly difficult to find volunteers to become Directors of Synod Trust Companies or to fill other offices of synod life.
- iii. It may be the case that synod staffing has also expanded as pressures on deployment in local pastorates has increased, the logic being that the synod can offer resource across the congregations of the synod, particularly perhaps for churches without ordained ministry of Word and Sacraments. We may need to question whether this is always an effective way offering that resource.
- iv. We notice, anecdotally, that when thinking about places within the United Reformed Church that are growing, flourishing, or where we see green shoots of new life, very frequently this correlates with leadership being offered by an individual. This may be a minister of Word and Sacrament or a Church

Related Community Worker, or it may be an Elder, or Lay Preacher or a Local Church Leader. Effective leadership does seem to correlate with flourishing. As a tradition we are often sceptical about individual leadership, and yet it is a vital part of good conciliar discernment and bringing into reality the decisions we make together in the councils of the church. All too many places within the United Reformed Church seem to lack effective local leadership, often because people are so stretched with the day-to-day tasks of keeping the show on the road, there is no time or energy for strategic leadership. Individual leadership tends to flourish, however, in the context of effective councils of the church in local Elders and Church meetings. One without the other is frequently less effective than it might be.

- v. There is a crisis in Ministerial Deployment. We are rapidly entering a world where there will be around seven local churches for every stipendiary minister of Word and Sacraments. Ministerial morale in many places is low. Ministers feel stretched beyond capacity. Some synods are currently over-deployed against their target figures for ministry and therefore unable to create vacancies. Other areas are vastly under-deployed and have struggled to call ministers, even where ministers in over-deployed synods are looking to move. We need an honest examination of the reasons behind these issues: are we now creating ministerial roles that are simply undoable, and as such impossible to call ministers to? Clearly, a key output of this review needs to address the struggles we face with deployment. We believe that further research and data is required before constructive proposals will be able to be developed, and our hope is that the research we intend to engage with will provide that information.
- vi. The impact of the lack of volunteers within local congregations has a profound impact on ministers of Word and Sacraments. Many now end up taking on roles concerned with the day-to-day running of local churches. They act as secretaries, treasurers, pulpit-supply secretaries, safeguarding co-ordinators, those who lockup and unlock. This means that precious little time is spend on the ministry of Word and Sacrament itself and the leading of the Church in its mission to the world. This can seem alien to the vocation to which Ministers responded, and leads to disillusionment, overwork, and burnout. It is notable that there appears to be an increase in ministers leaving local church ministry for sector ministry, or roles outside of the life of the church. This in turn, makes the pressure on ministers yet greater.

### **10. Financial resources**

- i. The Ministry and Mission fund is funded by the M&M payments of local churches (at times topped up by synods), and pays for all of the stipendiary ministry costs of the church. This accounts for about 70% of the expenditure of the General Assembly. Historically, this was closer to 80%. There is a reality that the declining number of ministers meets the decline in our income, leading over time to an increased proportion of M&M being spent on aspects of our life other than stipendiary ministry. The next largest proportion is spent on Education and Learning, particularly the work of our Resource Centres for Learning. The M&M fund then funds the work of the various departments at Church House.

- ii. As the membership of the Church has declined, so giving to the M&M fund declines. This has declined at a slower rate than our membership, meaning in effect that the amount given by local churches to M&M per member has increased consistently for many years. This increase is not sustainable. Many synods do now top up the M&M giving of local congregations from synod funds to meet the M&M offer the synod has made.
- iii. There is anecdotal evidence from synods and Synod Trust companies that it used to be roughly the case that free-will offerings covered M&M contributions and income from buildings covered the costs of the building and other local costs. Increasingly this seems not to be the case and income from building lettings has been subsidising M&M contributions. A knock-on effect is being seen in some places that local churches are falling behind on maintenance work of buildings, which over time increases the amount that needs to be spent on such maintenance as problems become more severe, not having been addressed in a timely fashion.
- iv. Synods are generally funded from the income from investments and/or income from the proceeds of the sale of redundant church buildings. In turn, synods often help fund local churches through grants which come, in effect, from the sale of buildings. This means, in effect, the United Reformed Church is 'selling the family silver' to cover our operation.
- v. Every time a local church closes, the proceeds of the sale of the building increases the wealth of synods and at the same time decreases the amount of M&M that funds the stipendiary ministry of the church.
- vi. A rough calculation suggests that of what we spend running the United Reformed Church beyond the local each year, 60% is spent by the General Assembly through the M&M fund, and 40% is spent by synods. Of the total amount as the family of General Assembly and Synods, we spend only around 40% on front-line stipendiary ministry. Around 70% of what the General Assembly spends is on stipendiary ministry. It seems we spend a disproportionate amount on support services for the work of the church as compared with our front-line mission.
- vii. We do not know how we spend the resources of the General Assembly and the synods. Each synod and associated Trust Company, and the General Assembly and its associated Trust Company, account for income and expenditure differently and record assets on their balance sheet differently. This makes it impossible to read the 14 different sets of accounts that make up the income and expenditure of the United Reformed Church and work out what we spend on what. For example, we spend a proportion of the M&M fund on Children's and Youth Work. Synods also spend money on Children's and Youth work, but we have no idea how much in total that is, or what proportion of our total expenditure as the wider URC goes on Children's and Youth work. This makes it impossible to take decisions as to whether that is enough, or not enough. It also makes it impossible to think in terms of 'if we are spending this much on Children's and Youth work, how might we most effectively spend it?' The same goes for every other aspect of our work.

- viii. There is a vast disparity in the accumulated wealth of synods. This largely correlates geographically with property prices. Inter-synod resource sharing prevents some receiving synods from going bankrupt. On their own they might not be a financial going concern. Inter-synod resource sharing does not attempt to share out our financial wealth evenly.
- ix. It is impossible to make easy or meaningful comparisons between the wealth of synods because they each account for the assets they own differently. For example, some include manses in synod manse schemes on their balance sheets, others do not. The work done in responding to the pension deficit has demonstrated this. It has also demonstrated the huge generosity and sense of mutual responsibility across the financial family of the United Reformed Church.
- x. Anecdotally it would appear that many functions are repeated 13 times over across 13 synods and again at Church House. For example, Church House runs a payroll, some synods use that payroll, others run their own payroll, some run both their own payroll and make use of the Church House payroll. We suspect that particularly in the areas of property and finance there may be very high levels activity being repeated many times over. If so, that would suggest we might be able to offer the finance and property service that our local churches need more cost effectively than in our present arrangements. We can't know this for sure, because of the impossibility at present of knowing exactly what we are spending on what.

### **11. Structures**

- i. There is a general consensus across the Church that we appear to be top-heavy in terms of structures. It takes around 500 volunteers simply to populate the Committee Structure of the General Assembly.
- ii. There appears to be a strong tendency for committees not only to engage with policy and strategy, but also to engage in quite a lot of operational decision making. This in part perhaps also relates back to issues of trust – are we willing to trust staff and officers to take decisions in accordance with the policies and strategies that committees have set?
- iii. The committee structure of the General Assembly, and the staffing structure of Church House do not neatly map onto one another. The Mission Committee and Mission Department are the exception to this. There is one committee with one committee convenor, the Deputy General Secretary for Mission who heads up the staff team who form the department at Church House. Even here, though, two previous reference groups continued to exist and several task groups were formed to support new areas of work. Ministries, Education and Learning, Children's and Youth Work and Safeguarding are all General Assembly Committees but map onto the Discipleship Department at Church House. The Communications Committee, Equalities Committee, Human Resources Advisory Group and Church House Management Group are the committees that relate to the Administration and Resources Department at Church House.

- iv. We also noted that the removal of the district councils from our structures has distanced local churches from synod and national activity, making it harder to involve representatives of local churches in decision-making, and to refresh the pool of those sustaining synod and national structures.

### Moving forward

12. **“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever”.**  
(Ephesians 3: 20). These words echoed with us at the end of our residential meeting. The issues before us can seem utterly overwhelming. It is tempting to put many of them in the ‘too difficult’ pile. However, these words of promise to the Church in Ephesus we believe are words of promise to the United Reformed Church too.
13. We are convinced that to discern wisely, we need as much information and data as is possible. For the Church to engage in questions around our future life, our use of resources and our structures, requires us to understand far better than we do our reality. We propose two explicit pieces of work to undertake with professional partners to help us come to a much better understanding of our current situation, both in terms of local United Reformed Churches, their hopes, aspirations and needs and a much fuller understanding of how we use the financial resources that we do have.
14. It is clearly essential to consult widely across the United Reformed Church during this process. We believe that the time for that is not quite yet, however. For the church to have a creative conversation about concrete plans for the future, that conversation needs resourcing with more information than we have at the moment. We propose to engage two organisations to work in partnership with us to enable us to gather a much richer picture of the life of local United Reformed Churches and also our overall financial situation. Thereafter, there will be some concrete information to bring to a church-wide conversation.
15. We believe that in addition to two significant pieces of partnership research, there are a series of additional pieces of work that we can progress with, some to address immediate situations of pressure, some in preparation for better discernment about the outcomes of this Church Life Review in the future.
16. Ultimately, our hope has to be that we can both better support the flourishing of local church life within the United Reformed Church, and for the Church to much more intentionally engage in new pieces of work, particularly the forming of new local (or networked) worshipping communities that become in time flourishing local congregations. The time will come to dream dreams of the positive new outcomes possible out of a careful examination and renewed stewardship of the resources we have. The initial stages of our work, however, we believe need to concentrate on research and data gathering, coupled with some thinking about fundamental principles, along with some smaller practical matters that perhaps can be more swiftly and easily attended to.

### **Partnership research with the think-tank *Theos***

17. Listening to the voices of local congregations needs to be at the heart of our work. We believe that this will be best achieved in partnership with those with professional skills in qualitative research. This is research that takes a sample of local contexts, and seeks through focus groups, interviews, careful observation of the context and the like to come to a deep understanding of that local context. We believe that we have found a partner for a piece of work like this in *Theos*, a think tank that specialises in qualitative research into the relationship of faith and society. ([www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk)). *Theos* have undertaken work with organisations like Churches Together in England, the Church of England, University Chaplaincies, Cathedrals etc.
18. A careful selection of a small number of local churches will need to be determined. They will be geographically spread, represent different socio-economic contexts, be a mixture of churches that represent growing, stable and declining churches and so on. The number of churches would be small (this would need determining in conjunction with those with appropriate methodological skills) but may be as small as around ten. The aim would be to arrive at a careful and detailed listening to those churches, their hopes, dreams and aspirations, what barriers they feel are in the way to realising those hopes, and seeking to hear what they are seeking from the wider United Reformed Church to support them in their vocation.
19. Alongside this detailed qualitative work may also be a quantitative aspect to the work, that would use the annual church return to gather information from across the United Reformed Church. We are still determining to what extent this is data we can collect ourselves, and to what extent it would enrich the qualitative data which we would expect to be more revealing.
20. The aim would be to gain an understanding of the identity of the United Reformed Church, about what forms of new life and work are being engaged with, examples of the 'hope that is within' local congregations, a sense of what barriers local churches perceive to their flourishing, and a sense of what congregations are seeking from the wider councils of the church to support them in their vocation to be the body of Christ.
21. The methodological design of the research would be undertaken by work between *Theos* and a reference group made up of members of the Church Life Review Group. The design may also explore whether it is also possible as part of research of this variety to explore aspects of the wider church (it might, for example, be possible for a couple of case studies not to be local churches but, for example, a synod, or a national-church piece of work like URCYouth or the Daily Devotions).

### **Partnership with Moore Kingston Smith in Forensic Accounting**

22. We believe gaining transparent, comparable, detailed financial information across the 14 entities that manage the finances of the United Reformed Church family is vital if we are to make good decisions about how we use our resources as a family. Moore Kingston Smith (MKS – the firm who audits the

United Reformed Church Trust accounts) has a Fundraising and Management department that specialise in work with charities, and who would be able to assist us in gaining clarity over our income, expenditure and assets as the family of the United Reformed Church.

23. The aim would be to gain a clear and transparent understanding of our finances at synod and General Assembly level so we had a clear sense of where our income comes from, and how we spend our resources. It would allow us to see, overall, how much we spend on which activities in church life. It would give us the information we need to then explore where we might be able to save potentially considerable sums of money on the services that are provided to local churches, potentially thereby in the long term being able to spend a much greater proportion of our money on front line ministry in local congregations (which will not necessarily be in the form of minister of Word and Sacraments or Church Related Community Workers).
24. Crucially, we need to distinguish between the core running costs of local churches, and the uses we make of our inherited financial assets. Anecdotally, we are subsidising those running costs in various ways, and should question whether this is a responsible use of the funds at our disposal.
25. A small reference group would work with MKS to design the process. This is likely to begin with a workshop to which would be invited financial representatives of the synods to design the basic headings under which we want to collect data. Once we had a clear and consistent set of headings that represent the wide-ranging activities of the church, the General Assembly finance department and synod finances departments would then be asked to populate the financial data against those headings which would then begin to show us exactly how we do use our financial resources. A similar process would allow us to get a much clearer picture of the wealth of the United Reformed Church family, where it is, and how it is used.
26. It may be possible to sample a small set of representative local church accounts to attempt to get an overview of the income and expenditure of local churches, and their assets. This would enable us to test the anecdotal evidence that lettings income is now a major contributor to M&M income.

### **Internal data gathering**

27. There is considerable data at our disposal within the URC database that we do not fully interrogate. It would be possible, for example, to map the spread of sizes of our congregations, and also to map growth and decline over period of time to see what this revealed in terms of future projections. We are delighted that the Revd Steve Faber has offered to explore the data we do have at our disposal, which may help provide background data for both Theos and MKS, thus reducing the costs of them gathering data. It may also reveal other helpful pieces of information as the data is explored.

## Theology and money

28. We believe that we need to do a piece of work on our foundational principles and convictions around the use of money, how scripture speaks to this and what our theological convictions around money and resources are. This can begin by a careful examination of previous decisions we've made and statements we've made. It may then need to move into a more constructive phase.
29. Intrinsic to questions of money are notions of 'fairness'. It is the language of 'fairness' we often turn to when thinking about M&M contributions, or ministerial deployment. What do we mean, theologically, by something being 'fair'?
30. We often work with a sense of covenanted relationship within the life of the church. The Plan for Partnership assumes that we all contribute as we are able, and then receive what we need. That is an aspiration most members of the church would probably commend. However, there is a sense in which that covenant has shifted over time. When the United Reformed Church was formed the expectation was that all contributed to M&M and all would receive a share of stipendiary ministry. The first part of this covenant still holds, the second does not. There is also concern that within this covenanted principle what it may mean in practice is that flourishing and active churches are prevented from growing their work further whilst effectively subsidising inactive churches. Careful thought needs to be given as to how we wish to steward our resources. What reflects the importance of the fact that we covenant together and wish all congregations to be able to thrive regardless of their economic context with the reality that this may mean in reality generous and flourishing churches being limited in their mission to support less generous and inactive congregations? How do we find the best balance through this tension?

## Structures

31. It is clear that our structures are oversized and over burdensome in terms of volunteer time. We do not believe that it is possible to begin a wholesale review of our structures until we have done further work on identity, vision and resources.
32. We believe that there may be some 'quick wins', and some rationalisation of committees, groups or sub-committees that might happen more speedily, that do not pre-empt longer term more substantial structural changes. We are asking the General Secretariat to initiate a quick review of our existing committee structures, to initiate any changes appropriate and bring resolutions to the General Assembly to effect this where necessary.
33. Related to the question of the committee structure of the General Assembly is the staffing structure at Church House. This too cannot happen immediately, until the conciliar structures of the church have been reviewed. In the meantime, pressure on the budget will require the Finance Committee and the General Secretariat to give careful scrutiny to expenditure and staffing levels in the next couple of years, as part of the ordinary cycle of financial prudence.

34. There is a further question about the Trust structure that supports the work of the United Reformed Church. It may be that this needs careful scrutiny in the light of our aspirations following work on identity and vision and our financial reality. Is it sustainable for the next 25-50 years for a small denomination to run its finances through 14 separate Trust Companies?

### **Minimum requirements to be a Local Church**

35. We are concerned that there does come a point when a local church is not viable. It lacks the local leadership to undertake the basic tasks and responsibilities of being a church, and being a church safely. We believe that, difficult though it is, there must come a point where synods exercise the function they have to dissolve a local congregation if alternative ways to realistically enable the life of that congregation to continue cannot be found. (The Manual: Functions of the Synod A iii).
36. Careful work needs doing, in collaboration with others, such as the Law and Polity Advisory Group and the Synod Moderators' Meeting, to determine what the minimum requirements are to be a functioning local church. For example, this might look like a minimum number of serving Elders (probably two), a Church Secretary from within the eldership, a Treasurer (who may be from outside the fellowship); a safeguarding co-ordinator (who may be from outside the fellowship) and a representative to the synod meeting, along with, perhaps, a minimum number of members (ten perhaps?).
37. The structure of the United Reformed Church makes provision for where local churches are unable to provide the local leadership necessary to function. It is possible to form one Church, with one Church Meeting, one Elders Meeting and one set of officers, who are responsible for a congregation that meets in more than one place. We believe this could be a fruitful option for many congregations with the right support and encouragement to enable this, and are keen to understand the barriers that have dissuaded local churches from pursuing this.
38. Where a local congregation is situated in a community that has particular missional significance (for example, it is the only church within a community, or is in an area of high deprivation with a lack of community resource) the synod could decide to, in conjunction with the local congregation, initiate a new Mission Project, which would require the synod to provide leadership and management for the congregation. This may require a review of the existing provisions for Mission Projects which presently are intended only for new causes, and can only be initiated by the General Assembly.
39. The sad reality is that in many churches who do not have the local leadership to meet basic minimum requirements often become very reliant on a minister to take on basic local administrative roles that are not integral to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and prevent ministers working with congregations where flourishing may be possible. We need to consider carefully how we support ministers who find themselves in that situation.

### Accelerants

40. There are a range of actions we believe that the church could take to assist in the flourishing of church life. Some might be able to be taken very quickly, others could only be developed and worked on when there is a much clearer sense of the resources that are available to us. There are also some ideas which could be born in mind now, which might help prepare for the possibility of future developments.
41. Building on the work we have done on safeguarding, we believe there is scope to support local churches by providing more model policies and guidance at national level. This could be made available online to local churches and synods. A site that held up to date policy documents, pro-formas for things such as risk assessments, local church policies etc that was an easy to access 'one-stop-shop' for local churches and synods could be very helpful. We have asked those working on the development of new IT infrastructure for Church House to bear this in mind.
42. We believe that there is a case for reviewing the Special Category Ministry scheme. Undoubtedly SCMs have done some great work, but there is a sense that perhaps the scheme, rather than the post-holders within the scheme, has not fully achieved what was imagined in terms of innovation. There is perhaps an unrealistic expectation placed on an individual ministry in an SCM post if the aim is to emerge a new Christian community. If we wish to take seriously founding new worshipping communities, research suggests it needs a small team of people to effectively enable a new congregation to grow, or to plant one. This might require the linking of ministerial resource with other resource. We will engage with the Ministries Committee to enquire whether placing a temporary halt on new applications for SCM posts, pending a review of the scheme in the light of the further work of the Church Life Review, might be helpful.
43. Looking further to the future, we believe that a greater concentration on exploring ways of encouraging vocations to ministry, particularly in much younger people, could be explored. Internship programmes around university degrees, or apprenticeship style programmes might form a context where people gain wider experience of church life, the church benefits from the gifts and graces of participants, and a context where vocation can be actively explored.
44. There will be a wide range of exciting possibilities that we gather in the course of our work, we are sure. The purpose of this first phase is to gain the information and data we need to be able to determine what resources we have to steward, how we best might steward them, which will in turn enable us to think about what new ways of working, and new pieces of mission and witness become possible.

## Conclusions

**45. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all”.**

(Ephesians 4:4-6).

**46.** Our baptism brings us into the heart of Christ’s story, which is the story of God’s ways with the world. At the heart of the reality of Christ, whose body we are, stands the cross. The Christian conviction is that through and beyond death lies resurrection hope. A hope which lies beyond Good Friday and the devastation of Holy Saturday. Jesus did not cling to life, but faced death squarely. Through that, life for the world was won. As the body of Christ that story is ours too. This is a moment we are perhaps called to face death squarely. We are living with the weekly reality of the death of congregations who have been faithful servants through the years. We are living with the death of ways of living and working as the Church that used to sustain us well, but no longer do. Facing death squarely is part of what we are called to do as the Church. Every synod or Assembly that receives news of a closed church knows this.

We find ourselves in a generation called to face the death of much that we have loved about the church. Change will not be easy. It will be challenging. But our faith boldly proclaims that as Christ’s body we do share Christ’s story – which is a story ultimately of resurrection and the transformation of life. We believe that living faithfully into that story requires us to take a long hard look at ourselves. As we do so, we know we will be surrounded by Christ who is our head, filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit who sustains our every breath, and caught up in the love of God who we know as a kindly parent, ‘above all and through all and in all’.