

**MISSION COUNCIL**  
*19 - 21 March 1999*

**MINUTES**

**FRIDAY, 19<sup>th</sup> MARCH 1999**

Worship was led by the Chaplains, the Revds Ken and Meriel Chippindale, and included a period of reflection and meditation on the events of Holy Week. This theme was continued in the subsequent periods of worship of Mission Council.

**99/19 Welcome**

The Moderator, Mrs. Wilma Frew, welcomed everyone to the meeting, mentioning in particular Mr. Keith Jenkins, substituting for Ms Anita Wilkins, FURY Council, Mrs. Marjorie King of the Scottish Congregational Church, Mr. Arnold Senior, substituting for Mrs. Mary Eden of the South Western Province, the Revd Graham Maskery and Dr. David Thompson, members of the Resolution 18 Core Group and the Revds Stephen Brown and Margaret McKay, Conveners of Resolution 18 Working Groups.

**99/20 Attendance**

There were 70 members present with 21 staff and others in attendance, the Revds Ken and Meriel Chippindale and Mrs. Sally Brooks (Minute Secretary).

Apologies for absence were received from the Revds Michael Cruchley and Robert Way, Ms Anita Wilkins, Mrs. Mary Eden and Mr. Clem Frank.

The Moderator expressed, on behalf of Mission Council, concern for the health of the Revd Martin Cressey. She congratulated the General Secretary, the Revd Tony Burnham, on his appointment and induction to the post of Moderator of the Free Church Council, and Mission Council expressed its pleasure and good wishes by applauding.

**99/21 Minutes of Mission Council 23 January 1999**

The Minutes of the Mission Council held on 23 January 1999, which had been circulated, were approved and signed with the following addition:

- 99/11 At the end change the full stop to a comma and add: "noting that the following nominations as Conveners of Assembly Committees would be brought to Assembly:  
Training – Revd John Proctor  
Ecumenical – Overseas Exchange Sub-Committee – Revd John Crocker  
Pastoral Care – Revd David Jenkins  
Welfare Sub-Committee – Revd Nelson Bainbridge  
Equal Opportunities – Revd Nannette Head  
Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness – Revd Frank Beattie"

**99/22 Matters Arising**

99/04 and 98/66 – Congregational Union of Scotland/United Reformed Church Union  
The General Secretary reported on the progress of the Parliamentary Bill for the union of the Congregational Union of Scotland (CUS) and the United Reformed Church. He confirmed that, due to possible delays in the parliamentary process, it was thought prudent to postpone the Unifying Assembly from the notified date of 27<sup>th</sup> November 1999 to Saturday, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2000. Acting on behalf of the Assembly, Mission Council approved the recommended date.

99/06 – Disciplinary Process Review (Paper M)

The Convener of the Working Group, the Revd Keith Forecast, introduced the report, noting the following correction to the second page:

the heading "Paragraph 11.1, 11.2, 11.3 and 11.6" should read "Paragraph 11.1, 14.2, 14.3 and 14.6".

Mr. Forecast explained that Paper M detailed the proposed amendments to Part I of the Section O Process which the Working Group was asking Mission Council to approve for presentation to the

General Assembly in July 1999. He noted that, in making these proposals, the Working Group had given very careful consideration to all the comments received since the Process came into operation and believed that the proposed amendments covered all necessary changes required in the light of present experience.

Mission Council, noting that if the proposed changes were approved by the General Assembly in July 1999 they would need to be referred back to synods and would then go to General Assembly for final decision in July 2000, agreed to commend the alterations to General Assembly.

*After the meeting some other minor errors in Paper M were corrected in preparation for submission to the General Assembly.*

Mr. Forecast confirmed that should General Assembly agree to the proposed changes to Part I of Section O, amendments to the Rules in Part II of that Section would also be needed. He explained that the Working Group intended to bring these to a later meeting of Mission Council and, as they would not be subject to the "reference back" procedure, they could be placed before the General Assembly in July 2000 for decision. The introduction to Section O and the two sets of Guidelines would also be revised.

The Revd Malcolm Hanson asked whether the review process was on-going. Mr. Forecast confirmed that further reviews would take place and the General Secretary asked that any further comments and suggestions should be given to him.

99/15 & 16 – Task Groups on local church premises and discipline (Paper I)

The Deputy General Secretary, the Revd John Waller, reported that the Mission Council Advisory Group (MCAG) had done as Mission Council had requested and had prepared remits for the two Task Groups and had sent out invitations to join the Groups. As he was still awaiting responses to the invitations, he was unable as yet to confirm the names of the members of the Groups.

99/23 Notice of Elections to Advisory Groups to Mission Council (Paper C) and the General Secretary Nomination Group (Paper H)

The Clerk, Mrs. Margaret Carrick Smith, introduced Paper C and the election to the Mission Council Advisory Group (MCAG), noting that there was a requirement to elect one Committee Convener and three members of Mission Council to MCAG. She explained that the Revd Julian Macro was due to complete his period of service as a member of MCAG; that the Revd Lesley Charlton and Mrs. Barbara Martin were due to complete their period of service as members of Mission Council and therefore would cease to be eligible to be members of MCAG and that the Revd John Sutcliffe was due to conclude his period of service as Convener of the Training Committee.

She suggested that, as a number of the existing Committee Conveners would finish their periods of service at the 1999 General Assembly, it would be sensible to select the Committee Convener to serve on MCAG from those Committee Conveners who would be continuing their periods of service. Mission Council agreed with this suggestion and the Clerk then listed the names of those Conveners eligible for election.

She requested that written nominations for the four vacancies should be given to her by the beginning of the Saturday evening session.

The Clerk then introduced Paper H, noting two corrections to the first page:

- the first bullet point at the bottom of the page should be deleted;
- the date of the second meeting of the special committee was 21 September, not 20 September as specified in the second bullet point.

She explained that Mission Council needed to appoint 9 people, of whom 5 should be Committee Conveners, to the Special Committee to nominate a General Secretary. Mission Council agreed to nominate the five Conveners from those Committee Conveners who would be continuing their periods of service after the 1999 General Assembly. The Clerk also suggested that, although the other four people to be appointed by Mission Council did not need to be members of Mission Council, their agreement to stand for election did need to be sought and therefore it might be sensible that those nominated were in fact attending that meeting of Mission Council.

Mission Council agreed and the Clerk then asked that written nominations should be given to her by the Saturday evening session.

Mission Council agreed to present the job descriptions for the posts of General Secretary and Deputy General Secretary as detailed in Paper H to the General Secretary Nomination Committee.

*The election of members of the Mission Council Advisory Group and members of the Special Committee to nominate a General Secretary is recorded at Minute 99/41*

#### **99/24 Mission Council Advisory Group (Paper J)**

The Deputy General Secretary introduced the report from MCAG. He drew the Council's attention to paragraph 3 concerning the request, from the Nottinghamshire District Council, for Mission Council to initiate a major review of district and synod structures and reported that the advice of MCAG was that this task should not be done at the moment. MCAG, noting that new structures were being set up in Scotland, a task group was looking at the grouping of churches, and various other experiments were taking place, believed that a more general review should wait until the present changes had been implemented and could be assessed. Mission Council agreed with this recommendation.

The Deputy General Secretary noted, with sadness, the news that the Revd Dr. Catherine Middleton had decided to resign as secretary to the Task Group on Grouping. He reported that she had been thanked for her contribution to the Group's work and noted, with gratitude, that another member of the Group, the Revd Brenda Stephenson, had agreed to act as secretary until the Group was ready to report.

The Deputy General Secretary reminded the members of Mission Council representing synods that, following the March 1998 meeting of Mission Council, synods had been asked to work with the district councils in their area to reflect on the oversight which they share with their moderator. A paper to help the reflection had been sent to synod clerks in May 1998 and the reminder was being issued now because synods were asked to report back in time for the October 1999 meeting of Mission Council.

The Deputy General Secretary then referred Mission Council to the request from the Equal Opportunities Committee to increase the size of its membership by two in order to take into account the extra areas of responsibility which the Committee had on its agenda - that is, age and learning difficulties. In response to a question from the Revd Julian Macro, the General Secretary confirmed that, provided that it remained within its budget, a committee could co-opt people with special areas of expertise for specific tasks and for a specific number of meetings. However, permanent appointments to committees could only be made with the agreement of General Assembly.

Following further discussion, Mission Council decided that the Equal Opportunities Committee should not be permitted to increase the size of its membership, noting that, whilst remaining within its budget, it could co-opt extra people or use consultants as necessary.

#### **99/25 Reports from Resolution 18 Working Groups (Paper F, pp. 39 – 119)**

The Moderator welcomed the Revd Dr. Stanley Russell who was standing in for the Revd Robert Way, the Convener of the Working Group on the nature of Biblical Authority for the life of the Church. Dr. Russell introduced the report from the Working Group, noting that they had considered many other Biblical passages in addition to those mentioned in the report. He also noted that texts, by themselves, do not settle anything and he commended paragraphs 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6 of the report which describe the complex nature of the difference of view points held by those within the church.

The Revd Margaret McKay, the Convener of the Working Group on the Authority of the General Assembly and other Councils, introduced the Group's report, noting a correction to page 70:

The beginning of paragraph 3.3.6 should read "The United Reformed Church needs to assess and explore ways of improving training for representatives....."

She suggested that the report should be read in the light of a strong theology of unity and explained that the Group had made a number of recommendations, detailed in paragraph 3.3 of the report, on ways in which the church might consider controversial issues in the future.

The Revd Stephen Brown, the Convener of the Working Group on Ordination and Human Sexuality, in introducing their report, said that the Group had become aware that they had embarked on a journey and that despite their various starting points, they had, through personal encounters which were of immense worth, experienced a developing sense of mutual respect across differences of theology and understandings of human sexuality.

Dr. Peter Clarke, the Convener of the Working Group considering the Wider Issues, introduced that Group's report noting that they had not felt able to provide clear cut answers; rather they had sought to produce a resource which could be used to enable discussion of the ethical issues raised.

The Moderator thanked the Conveners of the Working Groups for their work and asked them to convey thanks to the members of their Groups. She then invited Mission Council to ask any questions arising from the Working Group Reports. There followed some discussion about the process to be used in considering the reports within Mission Council and in reporting back to the various councils of the church.

It was noted that the Working Group Reports formed the basis of the Core Group's report and should be considered by the whole church in that light. Mission Council would divide into groups to think through the issues raised in the reports as an introduction to reflecting on the Core Group's report.

Mission Council then divided into groups to consider the four reports of the Working Groups and on re-convening in plenary session a representative of each group gave a brief report of their discussions. Each of the groups expressed their appreciation for the care and sensitivity with which the Working Groups had produced their reports and although there were still wide differences of opinion, everyone shared in the sense of journey and hoped that the whole church would also benefit from this.

It was suggested that some aid to discussion of the reports should be produced, but it was agreed that this would necessarily mean that the richness of the reports would be lost and that this would not be helpful.

The Moderator invited the Conveners of the Working Groups to respond to the comments, questions and suggestions. The Revd Stephen Brown reaffirmed the sense of journeying experienced by his Group; they had wept together, laughed together and in recognising the pain and the possibilities of their discussions had grown in their acceptance of each other and their view points.

The General Secretary asked members of Mission Council to send to him any suggested editorial corrections.

The Convener of the Core Group, the Revd Elizabeth Welch, suggested that Mission Council should consider Resolution 9.2 on Page 32 of the Core Group's Report. Following some discussion it was agreed that this resolution should not be considered in isolation, and that it was therefore appropriate to defer any decision until the following day.

At this time the Conveners of the Working Groups left the meeting  
applauding

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*The Core Group Report was considered on Saturday, 20th March 1999. See Minute 99/28 on page 7.*

#### **99/26 The Review of the Use of Colleges (Papers D and D1)**

The Moderator invited the Deputy General Secretary to introduce the debate. This he did, noting that the review of the use of colleges by the United Reformed Church had been an on-going process since 1994 and that the present debate was a continuation of the one which had been adjourned at the March 1998 Mission Council.

The Deputy General Secretary then reviewed the various reports, papers and events, noting that his rôle in the discussion was to remind Council of the background to the debate and to provide any further explanation required by the Council to assist them in reaching decisions.

He then reminded Mission Council of the uncertainty which, for some years, had been affecting all of the colleges. He noted that the 1998 General Assembly had resolved to affirm the use of Queen's, Northern and Westminster Colleges for the foreseeable future and that the decision on Mansfield College had been deferred to allow Mansfield sufficient time to respond to the Inspection Report and to enable wider consultation to take place.

The Deputy General Secretary noted that the Training Committee had considered and approved the response made by Mansfield College to the Inspection Report and he then introduced the following Resolution:

**Assembly welcomes the report of the Training Committee on the positive response of Mansfield College to the inspection report of 1997, and commends the staff and governing body on the imaginative work that has been done.**

Mission Council agreed that the Resolution should be sent to the 1999 General Assembly.

The Deputy General Secretary reminded Mission Council of the recommendations of the Use of Colleges Review Group contained in Paper L from the March 1998 meeting of Mission Council. He then reviewed the report of the group which carried out the consultation (Paper B from the January 1999 meeting of Mission Council). He noted that the argument in favour of ceasing to use one of the four current colleges was compelling unless either the numbers were wrong, the number of candidates applying to be trained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament increased sufficiently over the coming years, or the method by which the United Reformed Church funded training was changed. Mr. Waller invited Mission Council to decide, in the light of the original report of the Review Group and the subsequent documents, whether or not to recommend to General Assembly that the United Reformed Church should cease to use one of the colleges for initial ministerial training. When that decision had been made it would be right to consider Paper D1 and the draft resolutions contained within it.

The Moderator opened the debate by inviting comments and questions.

In response to a request for clarification from the Revd Tom Bayliss, the Revd John Arthur of the Scottish Congregational Church confirmed that there were no plans to use the Scottish Congregational College for initial ministerial training following union with the United Reformed Church.

The Clerk advised members of Mission Council that, in her opinion, in the light of the report by the Training Committee on the positive response of Mansfield College to the inspection report of 1997, they should attempt to base their discussions and decisions on the situation as it had been in March 1998. She reminded the Council of the statement made by the General Secretary, noted in the Minutes of the 1998 General Assembly:

“The General Secretary said that if the amendment (to Resolution 18 on the Use of Colleges to add “Mansfield” to the list of colleges to be recommended for use for initial ministerial training for the foreseeable future) were rejected it would not mean a vote against Mansfield College, but would allow the review to be considered. As yet no decision had been taken by Mission Council about its recommendation to the Assembly regarding the future use of Mansfield College.”

There followed a discussion about the decision made by the 1998 General Assembly and its implications. In response to a number of questions, the Deputy General Secretary advised Mission Council of the URC staff employed at Mansfield College and confirmed that the United Reformed Church, in accepting a student for initial ministerial training, also accepted the responsibility for paying his or her fees. He also confirmed that, as a College of the University of Oxford, the future of Mansfield College was not in question; the decision needed was whether or not to continue the use of Mansfield College for initial ministerial training.

The Convener of the Training Committee, the Revd John Sutcliffe, reaffirmed that the Committee had never made a decision on which college should cease to be used in the future; their advice had been that there were more training places available to the URC than were likely to be needed in the foreseeable future.

The Revd Colin Thompson spoke in favour of continuing to use Mansfield College for initial ministerial training, following which the Moderator asked Mission Council to vote on the following resolution:

**In the light of the Use of Colleges review group and the subsequent reports, Mission Council resolves to advise the Assembly that the United Reformed Church should cease to use one of the present colleges for initial ministerial training.**

The Resolution was carried.

*Subsequently, on Sunday afternoon, Mission Council agreed that the resolution to be sent to General Assembly should read:*

*Assembly, having heard the basis on which it was formed, accepts the advice of Mission Council that the United Reformed Church should cease to use one of the present colleges for initial ministerial training.*

The Deputy General Secretary again drew Council's attention to Paper L from the March 1998 meeting of Mission Council and there followed a discussion regarding the future use of Mansfield College. In response to a request from the General Secretary, the Deputy General Secretary read a letter from the Principal of Mansfield College.

The Revd Julian Macro suggested that the URC should try to keep its options as open as possible and proposed that the following resolution should be put to the Assembly:

**Assembly resolves not to use Mansfield College for initial ministerial training for the foreseeable future and asks the Training Committee to make careful and sensitive arrangements to phase out its current use for this purpose.**

The Revd Keith Forecast seconded the resolution which was carried.

Mission Council then agreed to send the following two resolutions to Assembly:

**Assembly supports the conversations that have begun between Mansfield College, the Congregational Federation and the Training Committee concerning the use of the theological and training resource of the College for purposes other than initial ministerial training.**

**Assembly gives grateful thanks to God for the work of Mansfield College, Oxford, in the training of ministers for the Congregational and United Reformed Church ministry since 1886; offers prayers for those who have borne the brunt of the uncertainty of the past two years; and seeks the blessing of God's grace on staff, students and governing body as they plan for future service to the Christian Church.**

The Moderator expressed thanks to the members of the Training Committee and especially to the Revd John Sutcliffe, whose period of service as Convener of the Committee would be ending at the 1999 Assembly. Mission Council expressed its gratitude by applauding.

The Chaplains led Mission Council in a period of reflection and prayer.

Mission Council adjourned.

#### **SATURDAY, 20<sup>th</sup> MARCH 1999**

The Chaplains led the opening worship and the Moderator welcomed those members of Mission Council who had not been present on Friday.

The Moderator welcomed the General Secretary, who reported that he had received following the initial presentation and debate at the October 1998 Mission Council. He reviewed Part 2 of the report in detail, including the mission programme which could be offered to the Council for world Mission in response to its challenge.

He referred Council to Appendix 4 of the Report, which gathered together the proposals relating to the future of the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee, noting the important rôle in the life of the Church envisioned for this Committee. He explained the background to the recommendation that the Committee should be renamed the Life and Witness Committee and that the number of members of the Committee should be increased by two.

The Moderator thanked the General Secretary for his report, noting with gratitude the amount of work required to produce such an important strategy document. She then invited comments and questions, and there was considerable discussion.

Mission Council agreed to the recommendations contained in Appendix 4 and considered the proposed recommendations to be sent to Assembly as detailed in paragraph 15.1 of Paper A. They were approved, with paragraph 15.1.1 amended to read:

“ 15.1.1 accepts the mission programme outlined in the report *Growing Up* and strongly commends it to local churches, district councils and synods.”

It was also agreed that the first part of paragraph 15.2 be amended to read:

“ 15.2 These proposals, together with the rest of the life of the United Reformed Church, are offered to God and to the Council for World Mission, by the General Assembly, as a mission programme for the years 1999 – 2001.”

With these amendments, Mission Council agreed to commend the report to the 1999 General Assembly with enthusiasm.

The General Secretary expressed gratitude to the Revds John Waller and Peter Brain for their assistance in producing the report and the Moderator, on behalf of Mission Council, expressed thanks to the General Secretary for his commitment. Mission Council responded by applauding.

**99/28 Resolution 18 Core Group Report (Paper F, pp. 1 - 38)**

The Convener of the Resolution 18 Core Group, the Revd Elizabeth Welch, introduced the Group's report. In so doing, she pointed out that the need for the church to seek the mind of Christ had been felt throughout the history of the Christian Church. In each generation there had been a need to discern whether the time had come for change or whether the time had not come for change. The United Reformed Church sought to establish what could be affirmed by the church as a whole, and what should be left to individuals' consciences.

Mrs. Welch stressed that the Core Group's report was based on the Group's prime consideration for the unity of the church. She then went through the report in detail, drawing Council's attention to key issues in each section and noting that there was a need for further consideration to be given to the section which indicated possible consequences (paragraph 8.7). There would not be sufficient time to do this before the 1999 Assembly.

The Moderator invited Mission Council to comment on the report. There was some discussion on the consequences section and the need for further work.

There being no further initial comments at this time, the Deputy General Secretary explained the process to be used by the discussion groups and drew Council's attention to questions which had been prepared to assist them in their deliberations.

The plenary session of Mission Council was adjourned and members met in groups to consider the report.

**99/29 Resolution 18 Core Group Report (Paper F, pp. 1 - 38)**

Mission Council reconvened and the groups reported. The Revd Elizabeth Welch thanked the groups for their careful consideration of the Core Group Report and the suggestions made. There was considerable discussion on the proposed statement contained in paragraph 8.6.2, following which the members of the Core Group left to deliberate on the possible ways forward.

*The Core Group reported back to Mission Council during a later session of the Council. See Minute 99/33 on page 9.*

**99/30 Resource Planning Advisory Group (Paper L)**

The Convener of the Resource Planning Advisory Group (RPAG), the Revd Duncan Wilson, introduced Paper L. Mission Council gave permission for an amendment to be made to the resolution contained in the paper. He gave an overview of the budget preparation process, noting that, in defining the draft budget for the year 2000, the group had decided to recommend the adoption of a deficit budget. He explained the background to this major change in policy and also the way in which the group had arrived at the proposed deficit level. He then invited the Treasurer, Mr. Graham Stacy, to explain the draft budget in more detail. This he did, noting that the budget had been defined to allow the continued careful expansion of activities.

The Moderator invited comments and questions. The Treasurer answered the questions and then Mr. Wilson moved the amended resolution:

**Mission Council recommends for adoption by Assembly the attached budget with amendments taking into account the implications of the footnote to the draft Budget.**

The Resolution was carried.

**99/31 Resource Planning Advisory Group (Youth and Children's Work Project)**

Mr. Wilson explained that RPAG, as part of the Budget preparation process, had received a proposal from the Youth and Children's Work Committee to explore ways of working with local churches to engage in projects with priority groups including the disadvantaged (inner cities, rundown housing estates, rural areas); the disaffected (truanting, exclusions, at risk of offending) minority ethnic communities and those with disabilities. The objectives of the project were consonant with the General Secretary's paper "Growing Up"; the programme would be locally based and after an initial feasibility study (Year 1) would be extended to projects in each synod area.

He reported that the Committee had applied for part funding for the project from the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE), and noted that any grant awarded by the DfEE would need to be matched by an equal sum of money from the church. Initially RPAG had decided not to support the proposals due to a pessimistic view of the likely outcome of the application. However, the DfEE had recently awarded a grant in excess of £100,000 over a three year period, and as a result he and the Treasurer felt that the church should respond positively to this initiative. He hoped that Mission Council would want to do the same.

Mr. Wilson proposed that, with Mission Council's support, RPAG should ask the Treasurer to approve an overspend for the present financial year (1999) of approximately £18,000 to enable the feasibility study to begin in April 1999; and that, again with Mission Council's support, RPAG should work with the Youth and Children's Work Committee to gain access to further funding to support the programme, reporting to Mission Council whenever necessary and particularly when further central funding might be required.

Mission Council agreed to the proposals and expressed enthusiastic support for the programme. Mr. Wilson said that he hoped to be able to provide further information at the October 1999 meeting of Mission Council. The Moderator expressed thanks to all concerned and Mission Council concurred by applauding.

#### 99/32 Nominations Committee (Paper K)

The Convener of the Nominations Committee, the Revd Glyn Jenkins, presented the report and asked Mission Council to agree to correct the end date for the Revd Dr. Lesley Husselbee's re-appointment as Secretary for Training from 30 September 2002 to 31 August 2002. Mission Council agreed. *See Minute 99/11.*

Mr. Jenkins then proposed the following Resolution:

**Mission Council, acting on behalf of the General Assembly, appoints the Revd Jean Black to the post of Secretary for Continuing Ministerial Education for a period of five years to 31 May 2004.**

The Resolution was carried.

Mr. Jenkins then introduced a further Resolution:

*(Faint text, likely a resolution or report, mostly illegible due to fading)*

In response to a question from the Revd David Jenkins, the Revd Graham Cook gave a brief introduction to the two appointees and noted that the job share possibilities had been discussed and agreed during the interview process. Following some discussion regarding the interaction between these two people and the Revd John Steele, the Secretary for Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness, Mission Council approved the appointments.

Mr. Graham Stacy advised Mission Council that advertisements would be placed with a view to appointing the next Chief Accountant early in 2000..

Mr Jenkins reported that the following nominations would be made to the 1999 General Assembly, noting that the appointments were each for a four year period:

Convener, Communications and Editorial	Revd Graham Cook
Convener, Inter Faith Relations	Mrs. Daphne Beale
Convener, Maintenance of the Ministry Sub Committee	Mr. Geoffrey Wood
Secretary, Maintenance of the Ministry Sub Committee	Mrs. Judy Stockings

The Clerk reminded Mission Council of the decision taken during the October 1998 Meeting (*Minute 98/66*) regarding the co-option of one member of the Scottish Congregational Church (SCC) to each appropriate Assembly Committee of the United Reformed Church, noting that, at that time, it had been agreed that the appointments should be effective until the end of 1999. In the light of the revised time scale for the Union with the CUS, it was suggested that all appointments should remain in effect until the Annual Assembly in 2000.

This was agreed and it was noted that the following representatives of SCC had been nominated to serve as co-opted members on Assembly Committees, with immediate effect, until Assembly 2000:

Church and Society	Alan Patterson
Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness	Ken Forbes
Doctrine, Prayer and Worship	John Young



The Secretary of the Youth and Children's Work Committee, the Revd Derek Lindfield, said that the Committee would welcome a member of the SCC joining their group. The Deputy General Secretary reminded Mission Council that the SCC needed to continue its life prior to union and that it was not realistic to expect that there would be a Scottish representative on every committee. The Revd Alasdair Pratt enquired whether there were any plans to have a member of the SCC co-opted to the Nominations Committee. Mr. Desmond Curry confirmed that the General Secretary of the SCC would be joining the Committee.

The Moderator thanked Mr Jenkins for his report and Mission Council expressed thanks by applauding.

**99/33 Resolution 18 Core Group Report (Paper F, pp. 1 – 38) Continued from Minute 99/29**

The members of the Core Group rejoined the meeting and the Revd Elizabeth Welch reported that they had considered all the contributions received from the discussion groups. She responded to many of the comments made. The Core Group had decided to amend the affirmations in paragraph 7 to reflect parts a and b of 8.6.2 of Paper F, and would present a new version of the second paragraph of 8.6.2 during the next Council session.

Mission Council adjourned.

**99/34 Resolution 18 Core Group Report (Paper F, pp. 1 – 38)**

The Moderator invited the Revd Elizabeth Welch to propose a revised statement which might be included in paragraph 8.6.2 of Paper F.

Following discussion, and affirming that Mission Council's purpose was to seek the mind of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, for a way forward which would enable the United Reformed Church to remain united and to debate the issues in a sensitive way, Mission Council agreed to adopt the following wording of the statement to be included in paragraph 8.6.2 of paper F:

**"In the context of the affirmations in paragraph 7, the United Reformed Church affirms and welcomes people of homosexual orientation within the life of the church and society but does not believe that there is a sufficiently clear mind within the church at this time to affirm the acceptability of homosexual practice."**

The Legal Adviser, Mr. Hartley Oldham, said that it would be sensible to include a resolution which would clarify the disciplinary issues. This was agreed, and the precise wording would be considered later in the meeting, with the other resolutions.

Mission Council then considered Paragraph 8.7 of Paper F: "Possible Consequences". A number of suggestions were made by Council members and noted by the members of the Core Group. Mission Council agreed that paragraphs 8.7.1 to 8.7.5 inclusive were acceptable with the minor amendments which had been suggested.

*Mission Council continued to discuss these issues on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March. See Minute 99/40 on page 10.*

**99/35 Elections to Advisory Groups to Mission Council (Paper C) and the General Secretary Nomination Group (Paper H) Continued from Minute 99/23**

The General Secretary reported that the number of nominations received meant that there would not be contested elections for any of the vacancies. Mission Council agreed that it would not be necessary to produce ballot papers and that instead the nominations could read out prior to voting.

*The results of the elections are detailed in Minute 99/41 on page 11.*

Mission Council agreed to extend the session and to move to considering other matters in preparation for General Assembly 1999 at this time to allow sufficient time to consider further the Core Group's Report and the associated resolutions, processes and procedures on the following day.

**99/36 Assembly Resolutions (Paper ASS)**

The Deputy General Secretary asked Mission Council to consider the resolution from the Youth and Children's Work Committee:

"General Assembly asks that every agenda should be headed with the question "What are the mission implications of this agenda?"

Mission Council agreed that the resolution should not go to General Assembly and asked the Committee Convener to refer the issue back to the Committee.

Mission Council accepted all the other proposed resolutions and expressed thanks and best wishes to the committees for their on-going work.

**99/37 Training Strategy (Paper E)**

The Deputy General Secretary presented the report on the Training Strategy of the United Reformed Church as detailed in Paper E. Mission Council accepted the report and agreed that the Committee should continue to work to this strategy.

**99/38 "Single Ethnic" Congregations and the United Reformed Church (Paper B)**

The Deputy General Secretary introduced the report. With Mission Council's agreement he proposed the resolution detailed in Paper B in an amended form as follows:

**Mission Council confirms that the Ecumenical Committee, in close consultation with the Multi-racial/Multi-cultural Development Worker and her Management Group, is responsible for responding to approaches from "Single Ethnic Congregations" wishing to join the United Reformed Church, and for liaison with district councils and synods and, where appropriate, with partner churches in the country of origin.**

This was carried.

**99/39 Communication (Paper N)**

The General Secretary introduced the report and asked that all suggestions and comments on this matter should be referred to the Secretary of the Committee Mrs. Carol Rogers

The Clerk asked Mission Council to note two corrections:

Paragraph 8.8.2 2<sup>nd</sup> line

Mission Council, led by the Moderator and the Revd Ron Clippendale, met for worship and shared in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

**99/40 Resolution 18 Core Group Report (Paper F, pp. 1 – 38) Continued from Minute 99/34**

The Moderator reconvened the Council and thanked the members of the Core Group for their patience and hard work throughout the weekend. Mission Council considered paragraph 8.8 of the Core Group Report (page 32 of Paper F).

The Clerk asked Mission Council to note two corrections:

Paragraph 8.8.2 2<sup>nd</sup> line

"recommendation (See CORE 9.5)" should read "recommendation (See CORE 9.4)"

Paragraph 8.8.3 should read:

"If any negative response amounts to one third or less in each of these groups of councils, then the annual meeting of the General Assembly in 2000 would vote to ratify the resolutions by a simple majority."

The Revd Simon Rowntree asked about the proposed timetable. The General Secretary explained the background to the timetable suggested by the Core Group, noting in particular the importance of allowing for the widest possible circulation of the reports and adequate discussion in order to help the church to come to a mind. He reported that the Core Group had spent much time discussing the timetable and although the suggested one was relatively fast, the Core Group felt that on balance this was preferable to the debate going on for a further year.

Following further discussion, Mission Council agreed to the proposed timetable.

The Revd Elizabeth Welch referred Mission Council to a new paper entitled "Further Amendments to Paper F" and introduced discussion on the wording of paragraph 8.7.

After considerable discussion it was agreed that the Core Group would revise the section of their report referring to possible consequences, in the light of the comments made by Mission Council.

*The decisions regarding the Resolutions to be sent to General Assembly are recorded in Minute 99/42 on page 12.*

**99/41 Election to Advisory Groups to Mission Council (Paper C) and the General Secretary Nomination Group (Paper H) Continued from Minute 99/35**

The Moderator read the names of the three members of Mission Council nominated to serve as members of the Mission Council Advisory Group (MCAG):

Revd Roberta Rominger (Moderator, Thames North)	Proposer: Seconded:	Julian Macro Peter Poulter
Dr. Donald South (Mersey)	Proposer: Seconded:	Graham Cook Bob Andrews
Mr. Ken Woods (Eastern Province)	Proposer: Seconded:	Elizabeth Caswell Clive Sutcliffe

Mission Council elected all three.

One nomination had been received for a Committee Convener to serve as a member of MCAG:

Revd Alasdair Pratt (Assembly Arrangements)	Proposer: Seconded:	Barbara Martin Ray Adams
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Mr Pratt was elected.

The Moderator read the names of four Committee Conveners nominated to serve as members of the Special Committee to nominate a General Secretary:

Revd Derek Lindfield (Youth & Children's Work)	Proposer: Seconded:	David Helyar Tom Bayliss
Revd Graham Long (Ministries)	Proposer: Seconded:	Simon Rowntree David Helyar
Revd Alasdair Pratt (Assembly Arrangements)	Proposer: Seconded:	Irene Wren Ken Woods
Mr. Graham Stacy (Finance)	Proposer: Seconded:	Peter McIntosh David Helyar

Mission Council elected all four Conveners and agreed that the Officers should seek to appoint a fifth Convener after the Meeting.

The Moderator read the names of those nominated to serve as other members of the Special Committee to nominate a General Secretary:

Mrs. Margaret Carrick Smith (Clerk)	Proposer: Seconded:	Julian Macro Arnold Harrison
Mr. Neil Platt (FURY Chair)	Proposer: Seconded:	Derek Lindfield Keith Jenkins
Miss Rosemary Simmons (Secretary to FURY Council)	Proposer: Seconded:	David Jenkins Keith Forecast
Revd Bill Mahood (Retiring Convener, Inter-faith Relations)	Proposer: Seconded:	Clifford Wilson David Williams

Mission Council elected all four to serve.

99/42 Resolution 18 Core Group Report (Paper F, pp. 1 – 38) Continued from Minute 99/40

There was a long discussion regarding the resolutions to be taken to General Assembly; many possible alternatives were suggested and considered carefully. Eventually Mission Council agreed the ten resolutions which would be put to the General Assembly, and authorised the Core Group, in consultation with the Clerk, to provide the precise wording.

The resolutions were finalised after the meeting as follows:

- 9.1 General Assembly commends to the church the affirmations set out in section 7 of the Human Sexuality Report 1999.
- 9.2 General Assembly sets before the church the challenges set out in section 8.1 of the Human Sexuality Report 1999.
- 9.3 General Assembly, taking into consideration the variety of views held within the United Reformed Church on the matter of human sexuality, urges all members, congregations and councils to continue in love together, respecting this diversity of views, supporting each other through the pain and tension of our divisions, seeking the mind of Christ and working together to fulfil the purposes of God in the world.
- 9.4 In order to test the mind of the church regarding homosexuality, General Assembly asks the councils of the church to consider the Human Sexuality Report 1999, and to come to a view on the following statement:  
*In the context of the affirmations commended to the church in Resolution 9.1, the United Reformed Church affirms and welcomes people of homosexual orientation within the life of the church and society, but does not believe that there is a sufficiently clear mind within the church at this time to affirm the acceptability of homosexual practice.*
- 9.5 General Assembly:  
(i) agrees that local churches, district councils and synods to discuss the statement contained in Resolution 9.4;  
(ii) agrees that if by 14 March 2000 such notice has been received from more than one third of local churches or more than one third of district councils or more than one third of synods, then the Assembly in its concern for the unity of the church shall not proceed to accept the statement;  
(iii) agrees that if by 14 March 2000 such notice has not been received, a motion to accept the statement shall be put to the Annual Meeting of the Assembly in 2000, such motion requiring a simple majority of the members present and voting to pass.
- 9.6 General Assembly declares that the acceptance of the statement contained in Resolution 9.4 would not of itself justify bringing a case under the Section O Process against a minister in a homosexual relationship (Basis, Schedule E, para. 2)
- 9.7 General Assembly asks Mission Council to do further work on the consequences (as indicated in section 8.7 of the Human Sexuality Report 1999) of accepting the statement in Resolution 9.4 and to report to the next Annual Meeting of the Assembly.
- 9.8 General Assembly deems that, with the reception of the reports requested under the terms of Resolution 18 of 1997, the process of further reflection and discussion set out in that resolution is complete, and therefore agrees that Resolution 19 of 1997 no longer applies.
- 9.9 General Assembly:  
(i) commends to the church the report of the Working Group on the Nature of Biblical Authority for the Life of the Church, and encourages local churches to deepen their studies of the scriptures in an atmosphere of open listening in order for the study of scripture to come more alive throughout the church;  
(ii) requests the Mission Council to consider the recommendations of the Working Group on the Authority of the General Assembly and Other Councils and to report to a future Assembly;

(iii) *commends to the church the report of the Working Group on Ordination and Human Sexuality as an aid to study in the continuing discussions;*

(iv) *offers to the church the report of the Working Group on Wider Issues of Human Sexuality to assist in further reflection.*

**9.10** *General Assembly thanks the Core Group and Working Group for their work, and commends to the United Reformed Church the Human Sexuality Report 1999.*

Mission Council considered the possibility of producing a study guide and a summary, but both suggestions were rejected on the grounds that a shortened version of the document could not, by its very nature, do justice to the amount of thought, prayer and work that had gone into producing the report. It was agreed, however, that the Deputy General Secretary, together with the General Secretary and the Convener of the Core Group, would produce a summary of the Mission Council discussions which could be used by members of Mission Council to provide an accurate report of the meeting, the spirit of the discussion, the sense of unity and the resulting report and resolutions.

The Moderator honoured the quality of the report and thanked the members of the Core Group for their work to date and for the further work yet to be done. Mission Council expressed immense gratitude with sustained applause.

**99/43** **MCAG Report on resignations of ministers and the secession of churches (Paper G)**

The Deputy General Secretary introduced Paper G regarding the possible resignations of ministers and secession of local churches. Mission Council agreed that the paper should not be sent to General Assembly but should remain with Mission Council for future use as necessary.

**99/44** **Closing Remarks**

The Moderator thanked the members of Mission Council for their patience and good humour throughout the meeting. She also noted that, for a number of the Committee Conveners who were finishing their period of service at General Assembly, this would be their last Mission Council for the time being. She especially thanked the Revds Elizabeth Caswell (noting that, as a Moderator, she would remain a member of Mission Council), Bill Mahood, and John Sutcliffe, Mrs. Susan Rand and Mr. Chris Wright. She then invited Mr. Geoff Lunt to read his poem, which Mission Council greeted with delighted applause.

The Moderator also thanked the past Moderator, the Revd David Jenkins, whose period as a member of Mission Council was also ending.

The General Secretary then thanked the Moderator, Mrs. Wilma Frew, for her year as Moderator. He especially thanked her for her graciousness, her good humour and her sensitivity in leading the difficult discussions and for her "right word at the right time". He noted that she had always spoken beautifully and with dignity when representing the Church and he particularly remembered her speech at the Assembly of the Congregational Union of Scotland when she had spoken movingly and with much joy following the vote on union with the United Reformed Church. Mission Council joined in thanking Mrs. Frew by applauding.

The Chaplains led Mission Council in prayer, concluding with the grace.



**MISSION COUNCIL**  
*19 - 21 March 1999*

**PAPERS**

<b>A</b>	CREAM	Growing Up
<b>B</b>	BRIGHT GREEN	Single Ethnic Congregations and the URC
<b>C</b>	YELLOW	Election of Advisory Groups to Mission Council
<b>D</b> <b>D1</b>	BLUE BLUE	Use of Colleges by the URC The Review of the Use of Colleges
<b>E</b>	PINK	Training Strategy for the URC
<b>F</b>	SALMON	Report on Human Sexuality
<b>G</b>	LILAC	Human Sexuality Debate - possible resignations
<b>H</b>	GOLD	Special committee to nominate a General Secretary
<b>I</b>	CREAM	A task group on local church premises
<b>J</b>	BRIGHT GREEN	Mission Council Advisory Group
<b>K</b>	YELLOW	Nominations Committee
<b>L</b>	BLUE	Budget for the year 2000
<b>M</b>	PINK	Review of Disciplinary Process
<b>N</b>	SALMON	Communication - The Information Service
<b>ASS</b>	WHITE	Church & Society/ Ecumenical Cttee/St Andrew's Hall/ Ministries/Editorial Cttee/Y&CW/Pastoral Cttee/AACttee



MISSION COUNCIL

*19 - 21 March 1999*

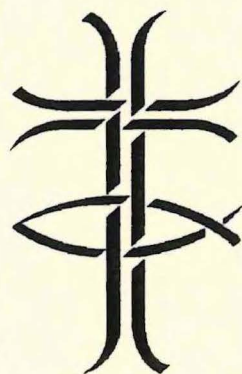
**A**

# ***GROWING UP***

**a Mission Programme  
for the United Reformed Church**

***A proposal for the General Assembly***

***5-9 July 1999***



### **To Members of Mission Council**

The text of Part 1 has not been changed substantially since the October MC, though 1.13, 4.1 and 4.2 are new.

Part 2 has been re-written and re-ordered though nothing requiring a particular decision has been added except the proposals related to 10.3.4 and 12.4. These are gathered together as Appendix 4. These proposals come from a meeting of the officers of the Discipleship Stewardship and Witness and the officers of Ministries Committees. Also present were Graham Cook (one of two responsible for the review of the CRCW programme) and Peter Brain (Church and Society). The meeting was convened by me and the recommendations in Appendix 4 were agreed unanimously.

**Tony Burnham**



# Part 1

## *A Church at the Crossroads*

### 1. The Churches in the United Kingdom

- 1.1 Any study of the mainline churches in the United Kingdom shows that the number of people belonging to the church during the post-war period has fallen. The experience of the United Reformed Church since 1972 is not unique. Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics have all shown a decline in the number of members<sup>1</sup>. In 1975, 72% of the UK population claimed to be Christians and 8 million were church members. Twenty years later in 1995, only 60% made the claim and membership had fallen to 6.5 million.
- 1.2 The 50% fall in membership within the lifetime of the United Reformed Church is serious but it needs to be understood in a context of general decline. Statistics are difficult to interpret and compare but the Church of England between 1960 and 1985 was effectively reduced to not much more than half its previous size<sup>2</sup>. And since 1975, when Basil Hume became Archbishop of Westminster, attendance at Mass in England's Roman Catholic churches has halved. It is with no satisfaction that we note that all our other partner churches in England, Wales and Scotland share this decline. It is true that there has been growth in the independent and in some Pentecostal churches. Davie comments 'Persistently high levels of growth may or may not be sustained as the house churches move into their second generation, a crucial stage in the development of denominational life'.
- 1.3 However the extent of the reduction in church membership and attendance is even more serious when it is seen in a longer perspective. Research by Robin Gill<sup>3</sup> shows that most of the Free Churches have been in numerical decline since the 1880's. For the Church of England and the Independents (including Congregationalists) the trend was obvious from 1851. His argument is based on comparative studies of national and local census statistics, churches' own records and a variety of nineteenth century social research sources. One of Gill's arguments is that a significant factor in the decline was the expansion in the number of places of worship: the more the emptier. Far from pre-World War 1 pews being full, he shows, for example,

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Davie *Religion in Britain since 1945* 1994

<sup>2</sup> A. Hastings *A History of English Christianity* 1986

<sup>3</sup> Robin Gill *The Myth of the Empty Church* 1993

that at Congregationalism's numerical peak, most of its chapels were only a quarter full. David Cornick<sup>4</sup> writes

*Historians have long noted that the ratio of Christians to the total population began to fall around 1840. In 1854 when the report on the only religious census ever to be taken in Britain was published, all churches had to face the sobering news that only 40.5% of the population were in worship on Census Sunday. There are arguments amongst historians and sociologists about the precise interpretation of that evidence, but it is clear that secularism had become a serious part of British life. People might still believe in God, might still view the world through Christian spectacles, but many no longer felt the need to belong to a Christian community and worship corporately.*

### The United Reformed Church

1.4 It is worth examining in more detail some statistics related to the URC. What has happened since union in 1972?

*(The figures are for the end of each year and, except for churches, are in '000's.)*

Table A

Year	Churches	Members	Adherents	Children & Young People
1972	2080	192	n/a	102
1977	1990	148	n/a	77
1982	1943	140	n/a	57
1987	1832	127	40*	70
1992	1803	110	56	104
1997	1738	94	40 <sup>#</sup>	89

\*1989 figure

<sup>#</sup>Category redefined as *Regular Worshipping Non-members*

Of course, membership may not be a good measure of the number of people belonging to the church. Moreover we may argue about the accuracy of the statistics returned annually by church secretaries but the continuing downward trend over the past 24 years cannot be denied.

The precise number of stipendiary ministers in any year is difficult to assess, particularly in the earlier years. However the figures used are sufficiently accurate to illustrate the trend.

<sup>4</sup> David Cornick *Under God's Good Hand* 1998

Table B

YEAR	MINISTERS (Stipendiary)
1972	1093
1997	720

It is worth noting the contrast between the reduction in number of members and the decline in number of churches and ministers (stipendiary).

Table C

1972-97	% fall
Members	51
Churches	16.4
Ministers (Stipendiary)	34.1

Table D

Year	Average per church
1972	92 members
1997	54 members

Table E

Year	Average per minister
1972	176 members 1.9 churches
1997	131 members 2.4 churches

- 1.5 These statistics do not reveal the number of members in Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Nor do they take account of the proportionately large number of adherents. And what do we make of the number of children and young people? Wild fluctuations in those latter figures must be related to the way the statistics have been collected but trends do emerge. If we conclude that it might not be so bad as we fear, nevertheless the bottom line is that the church is much smaller now than it was in 1972. This has continued a trend that began in the nineteenth century.
- 1.6 For local congregations there are many effects which arise from smaller numbers. There are fewer to do the work and pay the bills to fund ministry, buildings and mission. Of course, sometimes a small congregation can be more effective than a larger group of members who are less committed. Fewer members per minister ought to deepen relationships. Nevertheless ministers find that caring for an increasing number of congregations means more meetings, not only in the church but also in the different communities where the churches are located. The average figure of churches per minister in 1972 is difficult to interpret. Both Congregationalists and Presbyterians had many single pastorate churches. In addition, the Congregationalists had many small churches without ministry. At union a decision was taken that stipendiary ministry would be shared between all churches. It was a response to the requirement that all churches pay for ministry. It was this policy which stimulated the development of the multi-church pastorate. It is also true that falling numbers in themselves tell us nothing about the congregation's age spread, though general observation reveals ageing

congregations. If statistics are the only measure, we have not been very successful.

## Reasons for Decline

- 1.7 The peak of Congregationalism in England was 1910-12. Membership was at its highest both as an absolute and as a proportion of the whole population. Yet in a 1909 sermon on the subject of **Church Membership**, Sydney Berry, later to be the Secretary of the Congregational Union of England & Wales, said

*I am no pessimist but I confess that the signs in many of our churches are not altogether hopeful. At present they are held together by older people, but one looks in vain for the support that is to come after the older people have passed away.*<sup>5</sup>

If this seems at odds with the statistics, he offers an explanation

*People may come into our Congregational Churches Sunday after Sunday, they may help swell our congregations, and yet many never really become part of the church. And it may justly be feared, I think, that this disinclination to commit themselves to anything definite is growing.*<sup>6</sup>

- 1.8 In this brief paper it is only possible to present headlines, each of which deserves fuller explanation. Nevertheless the scale of the decline and the number of denominations involved ought to confirm that the reasons are complex and therefore are unlikely to be corrected by any simple solution. The starting point has to be the rapid industrialisation of the late eighteenth century. This was followed by a rapid increase in the size of the population. In spite of the Evangelical Revival, in England it is possible to interpret nineteenth century church history as the failure of numerous attempts to convert the newly created urban working class. Congregationalism was part of this failure. English Presbyterianism was less typical, smaller and dependent for its growth on Celtic migration doubling its 1850 membership by 1875. The Churches of Christ experienced their rapid growth between 1861 and 1892. (See Cornick)<sup>7</sup>
- 1.9 Although the churches in the nineteenth century failed with regard to the masses, large numbers were gathered in Sunday Schools, a vast range of organisations and improving groups, as well as at least twice at Sunday worship. However successful such churches were, their size was dramatically affected by the demographic changes of the early twentieth century, shown by the reduction in the size of families. The effect of these on the numbers belonging to a three-generation church was very significant. Part of our sense of failure today is that our small memberships are likely to meet in and

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<sup>5</sup> A sermon on Church Membership preached in Macfadyen Memorial Church, Chorlton-cum-Hardy on Sunday evening 14 November 1909 Revd. Sidney M. Berry

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit. p.123ff

manage a nineteenth century building with seats for ten times the present membership.

- 1.10 Robin Gill<sup>8</sup> argues that empty churches played a significant part once decline began. The decline could be due, in rural areas, to depopulation or, in urban areas, to the middle class moving to the suburbs. The situation was aggravated by the competitive building of chapels and the failure to prune the surplus. The empty church results in heavy financial demands on the remaining congregation, the need for ministers to serve more than one church, and newcomers finding it difficult to attend casually. Empty pews lower the morale of the congregation and give some evidence to those who argue that secularisation has triumphed.
- 1.11 Struggling with the effects of demographic change and empty churches, we then suffered the First World War. Check the memorial boards in many churches and imagine the devastating result of the loss of so many young men. (The board at Castle Hill URC, Northampton, lists 38 names). There are stories also of those who survived the trenches but, having been encouraged to volunteer by preachers, never went to church again. In the twenties and thirties, facing the hedonism of the middle class and the despair of labour, Congregationalism responded with liberal Christianity at its emptiest. The Second World War sacrificed fewer lives. Theologians' tougher response to the more obvious evils stirred preachers, while people's pastoral needs gave new purpose and the church began to recover its nerve. However, in the late fifties and the sixties, with full employment giving greater prosperity and the development of youth sub-cultures, the churches failed to make a radical response. In the seventies and eighties local churches, lost more ground. In this period elderly congregations benefited from the prevailing political values and were largely unwilling to respond to the issues which attracted both young people and thoughtful adults (anti-nuclear weapons, the environment, world poverty, feminism). The major source of recruitment, the children of our most committed members, of our elders and ministers, fell away. This lost generation is the cadre from which in the past we drew many of our ministers and leading lay people. The miracle is that 1738 congregations have survived to the present.
- 1.12 In contemporary Britain, there have been social changes some of which create difficulties for the churches. Employment makes demands on both partners, taking time from voluntary activities, and can involve moving home frequently. There is not only Sunday shopping but the day is widely used for sporting and cultural activities for the young, keeping them and their parents away from worship. This is also the day when children of split families spend time with the "other" parent. The media, for their own reasons, in general oppose, ignore or trivialise the churches. The sexual revolution of the past forty years, has presented further significant challenge.

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<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit.

- 1.13 Beneath these changes in personal lifestyle and habits there are profound changes in how humanity perceives itself and its history, past and future. Several centuries of technological discovery, economic growth and aspirations to personal freedom have climaxed in a world where too many people have ceased to believe in the traditional *something* and now believe *not in nothing but in anything*. There is resistance to organised religion as symbolic of the discredited *something*. Yet at the same time, during the past thirty years, there have been perhaps more serious enquirers than ever, all more or less disappointed by the claim of science and technology to be self sufficient and self-authenticating. This somewhat random subjectivism, whether formally known as post modernism or not, has not destroyed but has reshaped the human instinct to believe and to feel profoundly moved by human success or tragedy; the acres of flowers for Diana demonstrate this. Grace Davie calls it *believing without belonging*, but it is nevertheless the touching place where evangelism must begin again. It is our task to demonstrate the truth of what we preach by our love and our integrity, since that speaks much louder than words in a soundbite-ridden society. Our priorities and programmes must be shaped by this insight: Jesus said *follow me*. Thus, to worship the incarnate God is to ascribe value to persons and relationships rather than to things and deals, it is to coax young people into maturity rather than to damn every pleasure, it is to forgive even the Enniskillen bombers, it is to remember the wretched of the earth when the cameras have departed to another story. That is the living sacrifice which the apostle commands, *the worship offered by mind and heart*, not the dead institutional routine which has long since passed its sell-by date.
- 1.14 This brief description of the serious numerical decline of the mainstream churches in the United Kingdom, including the United Reformed Church, which began in the nineteenth century, points to the conclusion that there is no quick fix, no simple human solution to reverse this downward spiral.

## 2. Planning for Growth in the URC

- 2.1 There is a serious discussion to be held as to whether the church is withering or is being pruned by the Holy Spirit. Whatever the outcome of that debate, the church must still respond to its predicament. One consistent reply to the signs of numerical decline has been to urge the church to ***plan for growth***. At the 1983 Assembly, The Missionary and Ecumenical Work (MEW) at Home Committee dipped a toe into the waters of evangelism.

*The committee is inviting the Assembly to designate 1984 as a year of evangelism.*

Billy Graham and other evangelists were on their way and so the report continued:

*We hope that all our local churches will take up the evangelistic task in their own way in 1984, whatever that way may be.....to help them to do so, we have proposed the appointment of an inter-departmental working party, widely representative of convictions and insights in the*

*URC, to prepare materials for local use and encouragement as well as a major presentation on evangelism at the 1984 Assembly.*<sup>9</sup>

That brief paragraph is very revealing. The URC has never been comfortable with the word *evangelism*. It is not used in the Basis and appears in the Structure only once concerning the first function of the elders' meeting:

*to foster in the congregation concern for witness and service to the community, evangelism at home and abroad, Christian education, ecumenical action, local inter-church relations and the wider responsibilities of the whole church.*<sup>10</sup>

MEW at Home's paragraph avoids anything contentious by pushing the action on to the following year, allowing local congregations to take up the evangelistic task *in their own way*. In case this was believed to be too directive it was softened by adding, *whatever that way may be*. It then proposed that the working party be *inter-departmental*, rather than made up of provincial representatives. Even then it had to be *widely representative of convictions and insights*. Finally the task was defined, not as achieving a major objective but merely to *prepare material for local use and encouragement as well as a major presentation at the 1984 Assembly*. The actual resolution continued the cautious approach and remembered another URC sensitivity. Not only were local churches urged *to develop such methods as seem right to the Holy Spirit and to the fellowship* but there was added *ecumenically if possible, with the after thought and with prayer*.

- 2.2 **Growth for Their Sake** was the theme of the report presented in 1984. The Record states that the challenge was accepted *after considerable discussion*. Not until three years later did the Working Party produce **Planning for Growth** (Assembly Reports 1987 pp27-32). The accompanying resolutions refer the Report to each synod and district, each being asked *to set its own objectives*. The provincial reports back came after two years (Assembly Reports 1989 pp3-27). Afterwards the whole subject faded away. During this activity over the six years from 1983 to 1989 the membership declined by 12% (16,000 members). There may have been some small successes as a result of **Growth for Their Sake** but overall it resulted in an aim that was not specific enough and a timetable that lacked momentum.
- 2.3 However, if the term *evangelism* disappeared in a flurry of words and good intentions, at least numerical growth was not advocated in a mechanistic way. It is not just that we have a cultural aversion to such an approach but that theologically we are not convinced. There have been too many instances of growth arising from questionable initiatives.
- 2.4 During the same period, the Assembly was also going down another track. In 1982 under the heading *New Enterprise in Mission*, the MEW at Home Committee presented a report *Good News to the Poor*. Assembly agreed to

<sup>9</sup> Reports to General Assembly 1983 p.61

<sup>10</sup> The Structure of the United Reformed Church para 2(2)i

remit this *to the appropriate committees for consideration and action*. This was an attempt to respond to the needs of a nation with increasing numbers of poor people and, in some of the older industrial areas, high levels of unemployment. At the same time, the slow, steady, development of the replacement for the Deaconess, the Church Related Community Worker, continued. Both these programmes were not about building the church but building and serving the community. Over the years this programme, albeit on the margins of the church's life, has grown. However it has never been properly integrated within the mainstream of the church's thinking on mission. The twin threads of community work and evangelism have both woven in and out of the URC's life without becoming intertwined, both peripheral to the priority given to maintenance rather than mission.

- 2.5 In 1995 Mission Council identified Eight Priorities which were referred to synods, districts and local churches for comment. One priority was **Growth**. The responses indicated that no one was against it but some saw growth as the fruit of going about things in the right way and it was argued that growth should not be a target for its own sake. Other responses rejected *niche evangelism*, appealing to a narrow segment of society. The question was also asked as to how aiming for growth squared with the prophetic task?

#### **Growth: God's Gift**

- 2.6 In the New Testament there is much about growth and a great deal about evangelism: announcing by word and deed to those who have not heard it before, *all that God has done, is doing and will do*<sup>11</sup>. The call is always to faithfulness even if this leads to a cross. When Jesus sent out the *twelve to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal*, he warned them that not everyone would welcome them. As they were leaving those towns, they should shake the dust off their feet (Luke 9. 1-5). Planning a strategy for evangelism therefore is not to be confused with planning for growth. In the New Testament, *numerical* growth is not a major concern, although there is the important reference to the rapid growth of the early church in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. This growth came after the preaching, after the common life, and after breaking the bread. It was only then that

..... *day by day the Lord added new converts to their number*  
(Acts 2.47)

Growth in numbers is by God's gift not by our planning. But if seeking for growth is not our primary task, what is?

- 2.7 The purpose of our life as a church is spelt out clearly in the Basis of Union

*Within the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church the United Reformed Church acknowledges its responsibility under God:*

- ◆ *to make its life a continual offering of itself and the world to God in adoration and worship through Jesus Christ;*

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<sup>11</sup> See *Transforming Mission* David J. Bosch 1991 p.412



- ◆ *to receive and express the renewing life of the Holy Spirit in each place and in its total fellowship, and there to declare the reconciling and saving power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;*
- ◆ *to live out, in joyful and sacrificial service to all in their various physical and spiritual needs, that ministry of caring, forgiving and healing love which Jesus Christ brought to all whom he met;*
- ◆ *and to bear witness to Christ's rule over the nations in all the variety of their organised life.*<sup>12</sup>

If the church is faithful, then history records that, in God's own time, the church will grow. For example

- ◆ a decayed European church was renewed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the Reformation
- ◆ a lifeless English church was resurrected towards the end of the eighteenth century by the Evangelical Revival
- ◆ missionaries to Madagascar began work in the 1820's, were expelled after ten years, yet returned in the 1860's to discover that, after persecution, there had grown a thriving church
- ◆ during the Chinese cultural revolution, beginning in the mid 1960's, attempts were made to destroy the Christian faith. Churches were closed, ministers sent to work in factory and field. After ten years, when freedom was restored, the church grew and flourished as never before in all its history.

Through death the Spirit brings new life. In each of these examples, during the periods of decay, inertia, persecution and suppression there remained a remnant who were faithful and from whose seeds the Spirit reaped a harvest.

2.8 For a church to be anxious about its size is like our *being anxious about food and drink to keep you alive and about clothes to cover your body*. Jesus' response was *set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice, and all the rest will come to you as well*. (Mt 6.25 & 33) It is quality that counts: *You are salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless ..... It is good for nothing but to be thrown away.....(Mt 5.13ff)* It is by the light we shed and the good we do, that people will come to *give praise to our Father in heaven* (Mt 5.14ff) And so the message to those who gloomily ask if the URC has a future is *do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own* (Mt. 6.34).

2.9 Recalling that Jesus said *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross* (Mt 16.24) we ought not to assume that faithful evangelism will produce growth in numbers. It might produce the opposite.

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<sup>12</sup> The Basis of Union para 11

In short, church growth says *come and join us*; the gospel call is *follow Jesus*.

### 3. Unity in Mission

- 3.1 At the time of union in 1972, the URC saw its direction as dying and rising in further unions of churches. The Basis states that the URC

*sees its formation and growth as a part of what God is doing to make his people one, and as a united church will take, wherever possible and with all speed, further steps towards the unity of all God's people.*<sup>13</sup>

On a limited scale this happened in 1981 when there was union with the Churches of Christ. Now Assembly has taken a first decision to unite with the Congregational Union of Scotland. Further unions still remain our goal. But a sense of realism teaches us that these will not happen in the immediate future. What then is our role now?

- 3.2 This urgent expectation in 1972 for further union is perhaps the main explanation of the absence from the Basis and Structure of many specific references to *mission*. It is true that the purpose of the URC is clearly defined and it may be argued that mission is there in everything but name. However, nowhere is there a systematic exposition of the URC's understanding of mission.
- 3.3. Within the Structure the members are given opportunity in the church meeting *to care for one another, to strengthen each other's faith and to foster the life, work and mission of the church.*<sup>14</sup> One function of the church meeting is *to further the church's mission in the locality*. While many other functions of the church and elders' meetings, the district council and provincial synod fall within any definition of mission, the term only specifically occurs next in a reference to the General Assembly, where one function is *to support and share in the missionary work of the church at home and abroad*. Twenty six years later, our direction is still to seek unity but, given that progress will be slow, we now need to have greater clarity about mission.
- 3.4 However *mission* is defined, we may no longer use the language of *missionary work at home and abroad*. This looks backwards to a time when *mission* was an extra activity, when churches were divided into those who sent and gave and those who received and took. Within the family of the Council for World Mission (CWM), the URC has been a strong supporter of the concept of partnership. Resources are to be given according to ability and all have a voice in deciding how they are to be used.
- 3.5 It has taken some time for the URC to recognise that it is a receiving church. The regular input from five missionaries from partner churches has helped to change our thinking. Now, as a result of the proceeds of the sale of land in Hong Kong, CWM is no longer dependent on the URC for a significant part of

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<sup>13</sup> The Basis of Union para 8

<sup>14</sup> The Structure of the United Reformed Church para 2(1)

its income, and all thirty two partner churches are on a similar footing for giving and for receiving.

- 3.6 It is not insignificant that our CWM partners have now recognised that, after two centuries of seeing Britain as the source of missionary endeavour in their lands, the needs of Britain require them to share with the URC in mission here. Preman Niles' letter of January 1998 (see 1998 Assembly Report p.169) eloquently recognises this change.
- 3.7 The Council of CWM has also recognised that it needs to stimulate the mission of each partner church. Therefore each one has been asked to examine its mission strategy and to prepare a mission programme for a three year period. This challenge fits closely with the Mission Council's own decision to respond in appropriate ways to the decline in membership.
- 3.8 However any understanding of mission which is to accord with the URC's experience and roots must reflect our commitment to unity. The organised unity we seek is not of static institutions but of churches engaged in mission. The unity we express in our ecumenical pilgrimage now must also be between churches which are in mission together. The way forward is by *mission in unity* and our goal is *unity in mission*.

#### 4. Mission is.....

- 4.1 It is stimulating to compare different attempts to describe mission. Three expressions are given here:

- ◆ the purpose of the United Reformed Church
- ◆ a short definition by a writer on mission
- ◆ Five Marks of Mission

#### 4.2 The Purpose of the United Reformed Church

Within the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church the United Reformed Church acknowledges its responsibility under God:

- ◆ to make its life a continual offering of itself and the world to God in adoration and worship through Jesus Christ;
- ◆ to receive and express the renewing life of the Holy spirit in each place and in its total fellowship, and there to declare the reconciling and saving power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- ◆ to live out, in joyful and sacrificial service to all in their various physical and spiritual needs, that ministry of caring, forgiving and healing love which Jesus Christ brought to all whom he met;
- ◆ and to bear witness to Christ's rule over the nations in all the variety of their organised life.

4.3 As the final sentence of his important book, *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch states that mission is ***the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world***. This simple summary of the previous 500 pages of reflection and study highlights certain principles

- ◆ ***the good news***: the words and deeds that express the life, death and resurrection of Jesus;
- ◆ ***of God's love***: the mission is not ours but God's. The initiative is God's, ours the response; and God's love points us to the cross which stands over our life in judgement and grace;
- ◆ ***incarnated***: mission is not an extra but takes flesh wherever the body of Christ is;
- ◆ ***in the witness***: by a church which is not hidden away but gives testimony and evidence;
- ◆ ***of a community***: for the church to be effective, to be the body of Christ, its members must be in relationship with each other;
- ◆ ***for the sake of the world***: mission is being sent to the world and not for the church's sake, for self-preservation or its numerical growth but as an offering in the mission of God.

4.4 Alongside that dynamic analysis of mission it is helpful to use the formulation of **Five Marks of Mission** first drafted by the 1988 Lambeth Conference and later revised. The 1997 Forum of Churches Together in England endorsed this formulation:

- ◆ to proclaim the good news of the kingdom;
- ◆ to teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
- ◆ to respond to human need by loving service;
- ◆ to seek to transform unjust structures of society;
- ◆ to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Mission is necessary for the life of the Christian church, which, in the striking phrase of Emil Brunner, *exists by mission as a fire by burning*. Mission can be defined as **all the deliberate outreach of the church**: it is the sense of being called, sent and empowered by God, of being *the only human organisation which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members* in William Temple's phrase.

Mission is thus **activity in line with God's own loving purposes** for the world as we believe we know them in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit. Mission seeks, by word and by action together, to generate and sustain faith, hope

and love in obedience to God the Holy Trinity, interpreting the whole world of space and time as God's creation, affirming Jesus as Lord, open to be led by the life-giving Spirit.

- 4.5 Various activities follow from the basic understanding set out in these five marks of mission, including worship and evangelism, Christian education, compassionate care, campaigning on issues of justice and peace, striving for a more wholesome lifestyle. Some of these activities require particular gifts and ministries though all are, to a degree, for everyone. If the United Reformed Church is to embark on some fresh planning for mission, we would do well to keep these five points at the forefront of our thinking when we appraise new ideas and suggestions.

The witness of the church must be well organised but not compartmentalised. We need a strategy which will drive the approach of those whose primary task is to make more effective the evangelistic and 'church life' aspects of mission as well as those whose calling is to serve and work for social transformation. We need to speak and to serve. This first section has shown that the decline in size and influence of most local churches has made us less able to serve and less confident to speak. Added to which, the rapid change and growing diversification of British society leaves many traditional activities well past their 'sell-by' date and traditional church language barely intelligible. Now we have a unique opportunity for a fresh, constructive look. Mission thinking sees the wood for the trees; it deliberately reflects *on what God is about today and tomorrow*; it integrates our words and our activities in an appropriate evangelism and an authentic lifestyle; and generally it underpins church life and work with theological and spiritual strength which is not always there at present. We can evaluate not only our practice but our ideas against these **Five Marks of Mission**.

After all, if God had wanted us to live in the past he would never have promised us the future!

# Part 2

## *Towards A Mission Strategy*

### 5. Introduction

- 5.1 One starting point of **Growing Up** is that people feel something is missing from our life as a church. They look for a vision, a sense of direction, leadership: there are different labels. Usually it is related to a deep unease about numbers. When at Mission Council in 1997 the concerns of the synods were expressed, more than all the other issues mentioned were declining numbers and the need for mission. The foregoing analysis and theological exposition make it clear that there can be no simple solution to the problem of numerical decline. Yet in spite of all the frustrations amongst our ministers, elders and members there is a real commitment. In most churches, there is at least one thing done well. In some churches there are many things done well. But it is patchy: here and there, now and then. The challenge is to build on this commitment and on the faithfulness already demonstrated. The response to decline must be greater maturity in faith; not so much a strategy for growth but a growing up. It should be all of our members doing better what some already do well. It is about being more faithful where we are. It is being ready to share, eager to receive and open to learn from Christians in other places. Our calling is to be more loving as disciples of Christ, more trusting in the leading of the Spirit and more obedient to God, Source, Guide and Goal of all that is.
- 5.2 However it is also clear that some of our failure is a result of too many largely empty, struggling churches, the maintenance of which distracts us from mission, and whose empty pews discourage members and visitors alike.
- 5.3 The earlier analysis of decline (1.1ff), coupled with an understanding of mission in unity, which sees growth, not as an objective to be achieved but as a gift from God (2.5ff), and which may be tested by the **Five Marks of Mission** (3.10), points us in the direction of changing, building up and supporting the local church. Such an analysis suggests radical changes and many opportunities. Moreover CWM has challenged us to prepare a practical programme for three years. The programme described below does not deal with every part of church life but focuses on a few pivotal points for change. Nor are there proposals about district, regional or international mission. This is because these aspects of mission cannot be done well by a single church. They reinforce the need for mission in unity. Not everything will be new, as if no one has begun to create the building blocks of such a mission programme already. Some decisions have already been taken and some elements of a strategy are already in place.

## 6. The Mission Programme: An Introduction

6.1 **The aim** is for the United Reformed Church to balance its commitment to the unity of all God's people with a similar commitment to share in God's mission. The test of this commitment will be as we shape the life of our local churches according to the **Five Marks of Mission**.

6.2 The courses of action in paragraphs 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are set out grouping them under the appropriate **Mark of Mission**. Other courses of action follow regarding **leadership**, paragraph 11, **structure**, paragraph 12 and **finance**, paragraph 13. It must be stressed that this strategy points to changes, it does not include all that is already being done by local churches and other councils and their committees. In particular it is against a background of regular worship in all local churches and the mission in which they share day by day.

6.3 **The Timetable**. At the General Assembly in 1997 and 1998 various programmes were agreed and also in that period, Mission Council took some initiatives, all of which can be interpreted as separate strands in a developing mission strategy. These now need to be interwoven with further proposals to give a more rounded programme. In addition, the church needs to respond to OAIM's invitation to prepare a mission programme for the next three or four years. It seems appropriate therefore to attempt to achieve the aim (5.1) of the 1997-1998 programme.

It takes an overview regarding actions recently taken by Assembly or Mission Council and proposals for decision and implementation by different committees and councils of the church. Each proposal stands or falls on its own merits.

## 7. The Mission Programme: Proclaiming the good news of the kingdom

7.1 **Belonging to the World Church**. A vision is needed that will enable the local church to lift its eyes from the limited horizons of its own locality. This programme was accepted by the General Assembly in 1998. Various practical programmes have been outlined but their prime objective is to enable each local church to be part of a world-wide Christian family so that, *working together and learning from one another we can gain the perspective and form the networks that help us understand God's purposes in this age and enable us to proclaim and live a gospel that speaks to our time.* (A summary of the programme is in Appendix 1. A fuller account is given in Assembly Reports 1998 p 82.)

7.2 **Witness**. This is part of the calling of every member. As was outlined earlier, (2.1 – 2.3) the URC has shied away from direct evangelism. Partly this has been because it has been associated with some methods, styles of church life and theology with which many members and ministers have been uncomfortable. Yet there is an inescapable obligation for Christians to speak of the faith in which they believe. David Bosch speaks of the obligation of a

church to witness, to give testimony and evidence (3.9). At the 1998 Assembly, in a report on Evangelism, it was emphasised that *the local church and its members are universally seen as the primary agents of faith-sharing*. The need was also emphasised to *find ways in which Christians can learn to speak comfortably about their faith*. (The full report can be found in Assembly Reports 1998 pp 68-9). A resolution on the report called on local churches, district councils, synods and the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee to engage in particular activities to encourage evangelism.

However the lessons of the URC's past resistance to what the new testament means by evangelism indicates that the Committee must sharpen its focus, to help the people become more effective in its witness of *proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*. But people need help to be credible witnesses. The faith must be clearly and relevantly presented within each congregation. Everyone, young and old, should have experience of articulating this faith to others. We can no longer rely on those outside the church coming in to sample what is on offer. However any that do must find a welcoming group who are eager to learn about and share the faith, enjoy worshipping God and show that they love each other and are ready to give loving service and work for justice. If the Holy Spirit adds to their number, then we must rejoice. But the starting point can only be the word and deed of witnessing. To revive the desire to witness and to suggest the ways, must be the focus of the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee's work in supporting the local church in proclaiming the good news.

7.3 **Unity.** In the light of the historical analysis and the challenge we now face, the ecumenical pilgrimage towards unity cannot be viewed in contrast to mission or as a distraction from evangelism. The whole church should remain alert for every opportunity of co-operating in mission with other denominations and should continue to seek organic unity for the sake of mission: our emphasis must be *mission in unity*; our goal, *unity in mission*. Current developments include negotiations with the Congregational Union in Scotland, resulting in a first decision by the URC's 1998 Assembly to unite; the publication of the first report of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union; and the beginning of informal talks with the Church of England and the Methodist Church.

## 8. **The Mission Programme: Teach, baptise and nurture new believers**

8.1 **Children.** In the last few years the traditional interest of the United Reformed Church in the contribution of children to the life of the church (e.g. family church, all age worship etc) has been re-awakened by the Youth and Children's Work Committee and its staff. **Pilots** is another way in which it is intended to stimulate this part of the church's life. Pilots is a non-uniformed children's organisation in which the United Reformed Church collaborates with the Congregational Federation. Its aim is to enable children to grow in faith within the family of the church, by respecting the individual personality of each child. Its teaching focuses on the life of the worldwide church and on the Christian's calling to safeguard the integrity of creation. The Mission Council resolved to put resources released by CWM into the creation of a new post to



support local churches in developing Pilot Companies. A Pilots Development Officer was appointed in 1998.

## 9. The Mission Programme: Respond to human need by loving service

9.1 **The Local Church in the Community.** Proclamation of the good news is not only by word but also by deed. Many local churches serve the community well in a variety of ways. However it is an astonishing fact that throughout the history of the URC, no attempt has been made nationally to co-ordinate, share experiences, take initiatives, or suggest policy within this field. Alongside a renewed concern for witness, it is proposed to entrust the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee with the development of this new area of work. The proposal is worked out in some detail in Appendix 2 which makes it clear that: *In line with the latter three of the five marks of mission (4.4) we must re-affirm that to fulfil the church's calling requires a deliberate engagement with the local community.*

## 10. The Mission Programme: Seek to transform unjust structures of society

10.1 **Working for Peace and Justice.** The Church and Society Committee should be encouraged as it gives leadership, through its concern for the poor here and abroad, to the church's witness to the vision of the Kingdom of God. It should be encouraged to work for peace and justice in the world, and to keep alive the vision of peace and justice for the whole creation.

10.2 **Mission in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society.** A modest step has already been taken in appointing a Development Worker in this field for 1997-2000. Assembly will need to decide in 2000 how the whole of the United Reformed Church, not merely those parts of it with a visible ethnic mix, is to respond to the findings of this research. Work alongside Ghanaian Presbyterians having been reviewed, will continue. Some Urdu-speaking congregations from a Presbyterian background have recently come into contact with us. The challenging task of relating to these congregations, serving their needs and enabling their own mission is not straightforward. But all this work has enabled the church to begin to tap deep and diverse spiritual gifts which members of ethnic minority backgrounds bring to our own life and mission.

10.3 **Church Related Community Work.** Mission Council commissioned a review of this ministry the report of which was received in October 1998<sup>15</sup>. The report affirmed the work, which in different forms exercises a ministry of service (a diaconal ministry). It also attempts to transform the unjust structures of society by enabling people to take more control over their lives and local

<sup>15</sup> Church Related Community Work in the United Reformed Church by Graham Cook & Bob Day October 1998 available from the office of the Ministries Committee.

community. After listing the different models of community work and its theology the report makes number of recommendations, the chief of which are that

- 10.3.1 the theology and practice of diaconal ministry, largely developed by Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs) and the churches-in-community be taken into the mainstream of the United Reformed Church's life;
- 10.3.2 a policy is implemented which devolves the management of the CRCW programme from an Assembly committee to the synods and district councils;
- 10.3.3 it is aimed to increase the present ten CRCWs to thirty, with at least two serving each synod;
- 10.3.4 consideration be given to the appointment, not only of a CRC Work Development Worker but also of a second member of staff to support the development of community work of all local churches.

There are eleven other recommendations which refer to issue of accreditation, training and support. The above four recommendations have already been agreed by the Mission Council and the rest referred to the Ministries Committee for action.

10.4 **Sharing Synod Resources.** For reasons which are partly historical but largely to do with property values of redundant buildings, the twelve synods have unequal financial resources. Learning from the CWM pattern of churches contributing as they are able and receiving according to their needs, the synods themselves have devised a method of sharing resources. Essentially this involves redistributing 5% of their annual investment income in an inverse proportion to their income. It is now being argued that justice and the needs of mission require the sharing to be increased to 10%.

## 11. The Mission Programme: Safeguarding the integrity of creation

11.1 No further major initiatives are proposed which deal with this exclusively. Recent new work has been done by the Church and Society Committee on the environment,<sup>16</sup> on sustaining and renewing the life of the earth.

This is also intended to be a significant element in the teaching material offered by Pilots.

## 12. The Mission Programme: Supporting Structure

12.1 **A question for each local church.** Populations move. Across the road, there may be another church with whom God wants us to unite. There may

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<sup>16</sup> Roots and Branches: A starter pack to help churches care for God's creation. Available from the URC Bookshop

be another United Reformed Church in the town, and in coming together, both may be more useful to the Kingdom. There may be another neighbourhood which needs a church. Every church, therefore, whatever its size must ask: *Is there, here in this place, a part for us in God's mission?* If the answer is yes, then the question becomes one of assessing if the church is playing a full part in God's mission there. Such matters are not for that congregation alone. There must be openness to receive the advice of other churches through the district council and others.

- 12.2 **Small churches.** The 1998 Assembly requested Mission Council to set up a Task Group *to consider and report on the opportunities, challenges and difficulties* which small churches face. One issue which might be referred to the Task Group is the possibility of asking synods and the appropriate district council, to review the life of all churches with 10 or fewer members. 179 out of 1733 churches have 10 members or fewer. The proposal to review the life of such churches is not a coded way of saying such churches ought to close. They may be engaging more vigorously in mission than many larger churches. Even so, the question ought to be asked whether scarce resources would not be more effectively used if such churches united with another congregation. For example, there are towns where there are two congregations belonging to the United Reformed Church, each with fewer than 10 members. (There is nothing significant about 10. To set the level at 12 members would add another 48 congregations to the list and would require

church's mission and to require internal administration, new patterns of the grouping of local churches are being considered. Mission Council has already set up a working party on this matter which is due to report in October 1999. However the Structure 2(3) defines the district council as *churches grouped together for the purpose of fellowship, support, intimate mutual oversight and united action*. It would therefore be appropriate to explore how the purpose of the district council could be shared between a group of local churches and the synod. The danger of creating another layer of structure must be avoided.

- 12.4 **The Discipleship, Stewardship & Witness Committee** of the Assembly should be strengthened to cope with the additional responsibility for the local churches' involvement in the community. Proposals for a revised remit, its structure, staffing and new name are set out in Appendix 4.

### 13. The Mission Programme: Leadership

- 13.1 **Elders' training.** The key to change in the local church is leadership. This is the responsibility of the elders working with the minister. Many synods undertake programmes of elders' training. A significant element in that training should aim to improve the collaboration between elders and minister. The Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness and Training Committees should be asked to review the work which is being done and to present proposals for a systematic programme.

- 13.2 **Local Leadership.** In order that each local church should have better oversight without using scarce stipendiary ministry ineffectively, the supply of local leadership should be encouraged by each synod. The pioneering model created by the Mersey Synod could be a starting point. Guidelines on Local Leadership were accepted by the Assembly in 1998 (Assembly Reports pp 66-7).
- 13.3 **Ministry (Non-Stipendiary).** This form of ministry was created in 1979. After nearly 20 years experience, the Ministries Committee is reviewing all aspects of this ministry to see what lessons have been learned and to develop further this gift of ministry.
- 13.4 **Ministerial Accompanied Self-Appraisal.** This was agreed in 1997. Its purpose is to enable ministers to assess their performance and to identify areas where they need help and further training. In order to respond to the needs identified, the Ministries Committee, which has oversight of this programme, should liaise closely with the Training Committee regarding its policies.
- 13.5 **Continuing Ministerial Education.** This policy was adopted by the 1998 General Assembly. This policy should be implemented in the next three years. In many respects this programme could be the key point in transforming the church. The role of ministers in enabling local churches to reshape their life according to the **Five Marks of Mission** is crucial. By expecting ministers to undergo training throughout the life of their service, the emphasis should be on developing and sharing their knowledge of current thinking and good practice as it focuses on mission in unity.
- 13.6 **Recruitment of Ministers.** In the analysis, (1.4), it was demonstrated that over twenty five years the number of members had halved but the number of ministers had only fallen by one third. Whereas in 1972 there were 176 members per minister, in 1997 there were only 131 members per minister. It is easy to argue from these figures that there is no shortage of ministers. However the figures also show that the number of churches in the same period has fallen only by one sixth. This has resulted both in ministers having responsibility for more churches than in 1972 (from 1.9 to 2.4 churches) and more and longer vacancies. As a consequence, the cry of ministers and churches has been that more ministers are needed. The Mission Council in October 1998 received from its Resource Planning Group a paper on the **Procurement and Deployment of Stipendiary Ministry**. This offered a number of options for a recruitment policy for this situation. In the end it was agreed to budget for minister numbers to track membership for the next five years. If membership rises, the figure for stipendiary ministers will be increased at proportionately half the rate. However the figure in the budget will be reduced at a rate of about half that of any decline in membership. This policy ought to provide the finance for a modest growth in the number of ministers. However there are two cautions. First, this modest increase will be a charge on members giving. Second, budgetary provision, in itself, does not recruit ministers.

13.7 **The Call to Ministry.** The previous paragraph deals with the scaffolding. But the formation of any consideration of ministry with regard to a mission strategy, must be listening for the call of God. At the heart of our understanding of *call*, is the conviction that Jesus' words are true in our experience: *you did not choose me: I chose you.* (John 15.16) This call to ministry is to the whole people of God. However, to give leadership in mission, we must pray not only that God will call women and men to a ministry of word and sacrament but that they will hear and obey. To speak to a younger generation, increasingly alienated from the Christian institutions, the church needs more young ministers. To provide the energy and drive to transform tired structures, the church needs ministers with understanding of contemporary culture and lifestyles. The challenge is to every member old and young. Some should ask themselves if God has chosen them for the work of ministry. All should ask if God is asking them to speak a word of challenge to a particular person. Individual convictions still have to be tested by the councils of the church. But the United Reformed Church, with a mission programme has a worthwhile vision to challenge every one of its people to ask if God's voice can be heard demanding their life.

13.8 **Deployment.** In the union of 1972 it was agreed to *take steps to ensure that so far as possible ordained ministers of the Word and Sacrament are readily available to every local church* (Basic para 24). This intention was followed by an early decision to limit the number of payments of ministers, salaries shared between parishes. The intention was to encourage a more equitable distribution of ministers by the parishes. The experience was that, although a system of sharing ministers evenly was introduced in 1974 (deployment) those parishes with stronger financial resources, able to meet local ministry costs without much difficulty, have found it hard to understand a policy which limits the availability of ministers. Some of those wealthier churches have therefore found it hard to share ministry. District councils are discouraged from following mission-driven priorities by the overriding commitment to provide ministers for every church. (see 1.4 Table E)

#### 14. The Mission Programme: Finance

14.1 **Maintenance of the Ministry.** Although the fund is now named *Ministry and Mission*, the major part of its work is concerned with **Maintenance of Ministry**. This name reflects the priority being followed. Maintenance does have its place but the Mission Council should consider whether the element of sharing within the financial support of local ministry ought not to reflect mission more adequately. No one wishes to lose the great advantages of the central payroll system. However consideration ought to be given to a more strategic use of subsidy to support mission rather than merely continuing to subsidise a district council's inheritance from the past.

14.2 **Mission Programme Costs.** It is estimated that the major costs will include

14.2.1	three new initiatives (1999-2001)	£ (total for three years)
◆	Continuing Ministerial Education (Ref. 13.5)	£744,000
◆	Pilots Development Officer (Ref. 8.1)	£125,000
◆	Belonging to the World Church (Ref. 7.1)	£708,000

14.3 **Financing the Programme.** The resources available to fund this programme are already available and, with the help available from CWM should ensure that the cost does not fall on the local church and that resources are released to assist the local church in its mission. The resources available are

14.3.1 the reserves held by all the councils of the church

14.3.2 CWM has allocated £313,751 for the support of a mission programme

14.3.3 CWM has allocated £366,043 for self-support. It is proposed that the whole of the Self Support allocation be made available to local church projects (See para 14.4)

Therefore the cost of the new initiatives (13.2) will be met by drawing on reserves and requesting CWM's allocation of £313,751 for our mission programme.

14.4 **Self Support Fund.** CWM has set aside a capital sum to assist each partner church to become Self-Supporting. The URC has been allocated £366,043 The intention is for member churches of CWM to use this allocation to enable them to be self-supporting. The problem for the URC is that we are already self-supporting. CWM has set criteria regarding the use of the funds within the context of self-support (See Appendix 4). It is recommended by the Mission Council that this is made available for the self-support of appropriate community work through local churches. This would be a way of enabling the church to act on two of the **Five Marks of Mission** (3.10)

- ◆ to respond to human need by loving service;
- ◆ to seek to transform unjust structures of society.

The conditions and procedures regarding the use of such resources will be worked out by the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee

## 15. The Mission Programme: Next Steps

### 15.1 Recommendations

#### The General Assembly

- 15.1.1 accepts the mission programme outlined in the report **Growing Up** and commends it to local churches, district councils and synods for consideration;
  - 15.1.2 instructs the Mission Council to oversee the planning of the programme;
  - 15.1.3 submits the mission programme of the United Reformed Church to CWM;
  - 15.1.4 enlarges the remit, adjusts the structure and changes the name of the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee as set out in Appendix 4
- 15.2 These proposals, in all their detail, together with the rest of the life of the United Reformed Church, are offered to the Council for World Mission and to the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church for the years 2004-2005.

*whatever you do, in word or deed,  
do everything  
in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God through him.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Colossians 3.17

# Appendix 1

## Belonging to the World Church

### The Need

For centuries Christians from this country took the gospel to foreign lands. Today the striking missionary challenge is to present the gospel confidently and meaningfully here. Many of our overseas partners are steeped in the tradition of being "missionary" churches. Alive and vital they display a self-confidence that is sadly lacking in much of the church in this country (witness the comments of those who have served with us from our overseas partners outside of Europe). We should be learning from them that we might rediscover our missionary calling and, interpreting what we find, seek fresh approaches to God's mission here. We need to be challenged by our Christian sisters and brothers from other cultures on attitudes that we take from society which are not gospel or Kingdom values and which hinder our mission. At very least, we should allow their enthusiasm, commitment, courage and vision to inspire us and energise our sense of purpose.

Alongside this is another contemporary challenge – globalisation. The church being both global and local is uniquely placed to speak to this phenomenon. The increased control of wealth and power across the world by a few individuals and large corporations needs challenging, most especially where the needs of people are ignored and the environment is mercilessly exploited. Working with our church partners, sharing stories and experiences, we can make connections and begin to try and understand the forces that are at work behind the term "globalisation". As the Christian community, we too can be global players, but we need to learn from one another and to work much more closely together. Our world church partnerships make this possible.

For both these reasons we need to raise our awareness of the world church so that we might

- stretch the imagination and vision of people in the URC by exposing them to churches whose life, witness and circumstances whilst markedly different from ours, offer much to be learned about being the church engaged in God's mission today
- take seriously the global challenges facing us and find ways of responding together as Christians called to care for God's world.



## The Vision

God's purposes are global. They encompass the world, seeking to bring healing to the nations, reconciliation and peace with justice. They speak to our sin and failure, offering love and forgiveness; liberation from the past and new opportunities for tomorrow. They offer a vision of wholeness, of shalom – people at one with God, with each other and with the creation. They call us into partnership, to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Each generation has to make these purposes their own. To see in the signs of the times where God's mission lies for them. To interpret afresh Jesus' understanding of the kingdom and in their own words and actions to witness to these things that others might believe and share in the new life they offer.

The fruits of previous generations' missionary activity provide the foundations for our response to today's challenges. Partnerships transcending the world enable us to think and act globally; to make connections; to link local and international experience; to learn from and share with one another; to challenge others and to be renewed ourselves.

We live in a global culture. Our cities are international centres with communities drawn from many ethnic groups, cultures and faiths. Our rural communities now compete with rural communities across the world for markets which not so long ago were reserved for their own. We are part of a global economy and global news and entertainment media. Working together and learning from one another we can gain the perspective and form the networks that help us understand God's purposes in this age and enable us to proclaim and live a gospel that speaks to our time.

## The action

The 1998 General Assembly, receiving the above statement encouraged the Ecumenical Committee to implement an exciting set of programmes grouped together under the heading *Belonging to the World Church*.

The programmes are all intended to build into the life and witness of the United Reformed Church a new awareness of belonging to the world church so that we might better fulfil our calling to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, partners in God's mission responding to the challenges of today.

Briefly the principal programmes are:

### 1. Overseas Training Opportunities for Ordinands and CRCWs

On a reciprocal basis offering everyone training for the ministry or to be a church-related community worker the opportunity to spend two months learning and working with one of our CWM partners outside Europe.

## **2. Lay Training Opportunities**

Seeking to enrich the whole life of the church through our world church partnerships we will initiate with CWM events that bring together lay people from the URC and our partner churches to learn from one another and experience at first hand the richness and variety of the world church.

## **3. Opportunities for Young People and Children**

Working with FURY we will develop opportunities for young people in the United Reformed Church to learn from the world church. Through the appointment of a Pilots Development Officer new opportunities will be opened up for children to understand that they belong to a world-wide community committed to work together in partnership in God's mission.

## **4. Visiting Speakers**

Each year we will invite visitors for each province from our partners outside Europe to pursue a programme of mutual learning. They will learn about us and we will hear their stories of how the church is engaged in mission where they come from. Their visit will conclude with an opportunity to hear our visitors' observations on the life of church and society in Britain.

## **5. In-service Training Opportunities**

Opportunities and incentives will be developed to encourage those already working for the church to learn from our overseas partners.

## **6. Research Fellowships**

We hope to develop a research fellowship in each of our theological colleges for the study of an aspect of contemporary UK church life in the world context, with a view to developing our understanding and practice of mission here.

In addition we will develop and modify existing work, partnerships and programmes in line with the overall objectives of *Belonging to the World Church*, encouraging every opportunity for mutual learning, enrichment and support as Christians and churches working together we go about God's mission in the world today.

# Appendix 2

## The local church in the community: a call to mission

1 A glance at a few of the **changes in society that affect community work** of various kinds ( - and there are many kinds, on a spectrum from cautious room letting to outright political activism) reveals a steadily changing context and a varied pattern of how the churches are or might be responding.

1.1 The recent history of **public funding** for community projects presents a fascinating kaleidoscope. Direct support for capital and revenue projects run by voluntary bodies, including the churches, has ebbed and flowed.

**Schemes of job creation** from 1974 proved more and more demanding until many voluntary sponsors withdrew. Now they are being invited back and some churches will become involved in various aspects of the New Deal programme, in providing premises, ideas and people. Experience in the next two years will reveal the wisdom or otherwise of such involvement.

**Capital programmes** affecting church premises are legion, many of them drawing on public funds or on quasi-public funding such as the Lottery. The URC has attempted a relatively sophisticated approach to the acceptance of Lottery funding, namely that it is not ruled out for community benefit but is deemed unacceptable for direct church benefit; we wait to see evidence of how this distinction works out in practice

The system of **formal contracts** or similar arrangements for the provision of activities and facilities on church premises is now normally a condition for receipt of any substantial public funding for such work – day centres, lunch clubs, open youth work, etc. There are good stories and some not so good. Overall, it must be a concern that there is **no overall pooling of experience** across our church in the matter of public funding. Neither District Councils nor Provincial Synods and Trusts have much to offer in monitoring such projects and giving effective support. When our history is written, the failure of the wider church to collate experiences and to offer better support and guidance in such matters will be seen as a serious omission.

1.2 **All public programmes** have been radically and irreversibly changed from the post-war settlement. Thoroughgoing policy changes by Government in every area of public policy have affected community life and often disproportionately the poorer people across our country. It is not only specifically designated 'community work' that has been affected. Policy changes influence the well-being of communities and the post-war norms and expectations, often (though of course not always) in sadly damaging and divisive ways.

- 1.3 **New styles of community involvement** have emerged in the 80s and 90s, new ways for the churches to engage with others in responding to the needs of people within their communities. These include broad-based organising, the activities of 'social entrepreneurs', the transformation of some churches into community centres and campaigning round particular local issues.
- 1.4 Alongside all this, the **traditional programmes of provision** to particular groups continue to make vital contributions to community life. And, of course, the commonest community involvement by churches remains the **letting of rooms** to many different outside bodies though hardly any work has been done on how far room lettings may or may not be described as mission.
- 1.5 In addition, local churches would probably say that **collecting and giving money for good causes** can be valuable and authentic community service.
- 1.6 The pattern of church involvement is not known in any detail but this should not necessarily encourage us nor invite exaggeration of what is being done. Some research was carried out by Church and Society in 1993 into local church involvement in community work and service. The researcher stated: "The results suggest that relatively little effort has been made to identify the **changing needs of society in recent years**. Few new initiatives have been started in the past five years"

**engagement with the local community.** All those church programmes that might be described broadly as community work (from basic service provision to a more partnership-based enabling style) must be regularly reviewed and improved to meet the changing needs and expectations of those around us. People actually deserve more than 'the best we can manage' and certainly more than 'the best we could think of twenty years ago'.

We need to begin by affirming the **variety of styles** of what has to be generically called 'community work', though we should also say that some are more authentic than others. We should start from a basic premise that the aim of good community work is to enable and to empower local communities and vulnerable groups, as well as to serve and provide for them. The logic of this is usually that the church does not 'go it alone' but joins with other bodies around that aim; there is some experience of this in the URC. This approach is far from straightforward, since the credibility of the church in seeking the well-being of a community is not always established – many suspect us of hidden motives – nor is it easy for Christians to form demanding partnerships with non-Christians. But this open approach can result in a deepening of the quality of church life and a strengthening of our credibility.

- 3 The resources of the church for mission activity are three-fold, primarily people, then funds, then buildings. Mission Council has taken steps to begin work on a strategy for the use of local church premises.

We can look to a **range of human resources**:

- ◆ *regular ordained ministers*, many of whom are experienced in community work of one kind or another; with new patterns of continuing ministerial education, many more ministers will have the chance to acquire skills in this area;
- ◆ *ministers in 'special category' posts*, with specialist work, in demanding locations or within institutions; such ministries are sometimes resented as being a distraction from the 'real ministry' in the local pastorate but this experience must be seen as a valuable resource;
- ◆ *Church Related Community Workers*, self-evidently a primary resource for any developing strategy of church and community engagement; as well as those in post there are several others whom we have not used since they ceased to be in post, even though considerable sums have been spent on their training;
- ◆ *professional people* in our churches, qualified professionals in relevant fields (community work, education, politics, social sciences, finance, building, administration, etc.) are often available to help; we often fail to acknowledge them and their work as part of God's mission in the world today;
- ◆ *other people with time* in today's world, the most precious gift of all to offer.
- ◆ *Sharing in decision making about the best use of CWM's Self Support fund allocation.*

4 What gives this discussion its edge and thrust is, of course, the **prospect of new funding**. This is primarily down to the Council for World Mission and their challenge to us, though grants made from Assembly funds each year to local projects already exceed £100k. Thus it is not simply the 'new money' which has sparked off new thinking for there has been growing scope for funding of new work in recent years; but the *CWM challenge* (to concentrate on mission in our own land) has jolted and spurred us.

5 The specific proposal which affects the national church is for an enabling programme (see below) to be managed by a new staff member, a **Secretary for Church and Community**. But it must be stressed that the proposal must be evaluated by the intended impact on **local** churches, with actions and events at Provincial and District levels intended towards that basic aim.

5.1 The **additional post** linked to the Church and Community Subcommittee would have responsibility for:

- ◆ overall policy development in church and community work;
- ◆ implementing the 'enabling programme';
- ◆ promoting research and exchange of information, ideas, etc. among

local churches and other Councils;

5.2 One way of implementing any overall commitment in a new mission strategy which committed us to reach out more pro-actively into the community would be an **annual enabling programme**, co-ordinated nationally but delivered at local, district and synod 'level', including at least these elements:

5.2.1 There might be additional specific training opportunities in community work to existing ministers and leaders at £5k + per synod, no less than ten persons to benefit each year. (£75k pa) These might well be provided by one or more specialist bodies contracted to serve the whole church. Some of these opportunities might be overseas or involve overseas personnel, through the complementary 'Belonging to the World Church' programme.

5.2.2 There might be major consultations, one per synod per year, on church and community involvement, (£13k pa). Here could be addressed such topics as criteria for good projects, applying for funds, making cross-community partnerships, coping with criticism, etc.

5.2.3 It would be helpful if, there were some opportunities to share these ideas and information imaginatively in each District, to revisit earlier proposals which never went anywhere, to identify those best with overall objectives, and to commission under 5.2.3 below.

For funding through the 'Self-Support Fund' of CWM: The Secretary for Church and Community would collect and monitor these against agreed criteria to ensure balance across the list and might also be able to advise on general fund-raising strategies appropriate to shortlisted projects in collaboration with Provinces.

The Secretary for Church and Community would need to liaise widely to ensure that best use is taken of ecumenical options throughout this enabling programme.

5.3 Fairly soon, Mission Council should commission fresh **independent research** into what community work is being done in our churches, what form it takes and how effective it is. This would be done by a statistical survey and a supplementary qualitative survey and might take six – nine months.

Having reviewed the current mood of the church, the context and the theological imperative for community work as mission, and the fresh opportunity to deploy some new money, these proposals could form a key element in the new mission strategy being developed for the United Reformed Church into our second 25 years.

# Appendix 3

## CWM's Self Support Fund

This fund arose out of a desire to place the control of some additional financial resources under the control of each member church. It was decided by the Council that churches should be encouraged to provide for some of their own financial needs rather than rely on grants from abroad.

However it was also recognised that all member churches should learn to be receivers as well as givers. Therefore the Fund (£7.5m) was apportioned between the member churches using a formula that took account of the relative economic strength of the country, the size of the church and the number of sovereign nations in which the church was set.

The amount allocated to the URC under this formula is £366,043. This does not have to be spent on a single project and all applications will be assessed by CWM before funds are released.

The Self-Support Fund is for projects that

- ◆ represent the church's long-term strategy to become self sufficient;
- ◆ can support the church's mission priorities;
- ◆ are economically viable and sustainable, taking into account the country's economic situation and showing good business practice;
- ◆ will generate profits in the short and medium term;
- ◆ use safe investment options;
- ◆ create jobs, especially for unemployed people in the church;
- ◆ will increase the member church's contribution to CWM's common pool of funds

# Appendix 4

## Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee

The Mission Council, having noted the suggestions in 9.1 and Appendix 3, the Review of Church Related Community Work (see 10.3); and the proposals for the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness Committee in 11.4 recommend the following:

1. The Committee be given the additional responsibility for the work of the local church in the community with a revised remit:

The purpose of the Life and Witness Committee is:

1. to enable the local church to capture the vision of God's mission for itself and to plan its life accordingly;
2. to encourage growth in faith among people of all ages;
3. to challenge members in their stewardship and witness;
4. to encourage the local church to engage with its community in evangelism, if possible ecumenically;
5. to enable each church to engage with its local community in partnership and service:
  - by gathering ideas and experience, including best practice, and advocating these to the local church;
  - by monitoring and assessing relevant government policy and advising the local church accordingly;
6. to support the work of elders and the work of District Council in its oversight of the local church;
7. to stimulate District Councils and Synods in the development of their own strategies for mission;
8. to support the work of the Windermere Centre and of the Rural Consultant;
9. to enable ongoing reflection on issues related to the Community of Women and Men in the Church.



2. The Committee will be increased in size from eight to ten members.
3. The Committee will continue, for the time being, with separate sub-committees for stewardship, and the Community of Women and Men in the Church. The Committee may also commission task groups for specific work.
4. The Committee will be named the **Life and Witness Committee**. It would be inappropriate to add **Community** to an already cumbersome title. This new name does describe in general terms the remit: it is about the *life* of the church and of Christians and yet avoids any inward looking reference. *Witness* is by word and deed, carrying the implications of evangelism and action in the community.
5. **Staffing.** The Revd. John Steele will be the Secretary for Life and Witness. He will work with the new appointed CRCW Development Worker, whose job description includes some responsibility for the local church's community work. With regard to a proposal for a second post in the field of community work, Mission Council has asked the General Secretary to convene a meeting of the officers of the Life and Witness, Ministries, Training and Church & Society Committees to look again at this. Such a meeting should take place approximately nine months after the CRCW Development Worker has been in



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**B**

**'Single Ethnic' Congregations and the United Reformed Church**

**Introduction**

Mission Council, at its meeting on 5-7 October 1998, referred the implications of being a church in a multi-racial, multi-cultural society in the first instance to the Ecumenical Committee. (*Growing Up: A strategy for mission – the next steps: item 13*).

The Ecumenical Committee, meeting on 4-5 February 1999, was neither clear what the October 1998 Mission Council was asking it to do nor whether the work was being located in the right place. The Secretary for Ecumenical Relations was asked to bring the matter to the March 1999 Mission Council, setting out the issues and asking for further guidance.

**Some background**

Two Urdu-speaking Pakistani congregations of Presbyterian origin meeting for worship in the London area have expressed an interest in becoming congregations of the United Reformed Church. There have also been preliminary enquiries from two other congregations. This is a very exciting development.

The United Reformed Church has had many years of experience of work with 'single ethnic' groups through the Ghanaian and Chinese chaplaincies but that has been a different model of working.

**Where should this new development be located in our structures?**

1. The receiving of new churches is normally a matter for District Meeting, Synod and then General Assembly and would not therefore be the concern of an Assembly committee. However, the Ecumenical Committee has issued guidelines on our *Reformed Expectations* where the United Reformed Church is considering being part of a new LEP.
2. The applications from Urdu-speaking congregations are different because they are made by a minority ethnic group, worshipping in a minority language who therefore bring a very particular contribution to our life. It is not just a matter of being welcomed and absorbed into the United Reformed Church.
3. The Presbyterian Church (USA), which already has many such congregations, sees them as the most exciting area of their church's growth and locates their support and development on the *Evangelism and Church Development* desk in the central office.

4. Two of the objectives of the post of the URC's Multi- Cultural/Multi- Racial Development Worker are
- *to help the United Reformed Church at every level to be more open and integrated culturally and racially and*
  - *to explore the task of mission in our Multi-Cultural society*

Marjorie Lewis-Cooper and her Management Group will be bringing policy proposals to General Assembly 2000 which will be directly relevant to this matter.

**The Ecumenical Committee would like Mission Council to confirm that, in close consultation with the Multi-Racial/Multi-Cultural Development Worker and her Management Group, its responsibility is to follow-up approaches, liaise with Districts and Synods and, where appropriate, with partner churches in the countries of origin.**

*Sheila Maxey  
Feb 99*



# MISSION COUNCIL

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# C

## Election of Advisory Groups to Mission Council

The groups are listed below. Under each there is a statement of its remit, a list of the current members and the date on which their service ends. There are also details of eligibility and length of service.

### 1. Mission Council Advisory Group

*The group plans the meeting of MC and the follow up necessary. It provides personal support and advice for the Assembly Moderator and the General Secretary.*

Moderator	Wilma Frew	
Immediate past Moderator	David Jenkins	
Moderator-elect	Peter McIntosh	
2 Committee Conveners	John Sutcliffe	1999
	Graham Long	2001
Treasurer	Graham Stacy	
4 members of Mission Council	Julian Macro	1999
	Lesley Charlton	2000
	Barbara Martin	2001
	Delyth Rees	2002
General Secretary	Tony Burnham	

(Deputy General Secretary in attendance).

Conveners serve for 4 years from year of appointment or until they cease to be conveners, whichever is the shorter.

Members serve for 4 years from year of appointment or until they cease to be members of Mission Council, whichever is the shorter.

### 2. Resource Planning Advisory Group

*The Group prepares a rolling five year plan which takes account of possible changes in society and in the life of the church on which the allocation of resources may be based. It is responsible for budgets. It holds one or two consultations with the financial representatives of the synods each year. It also consults with those responsible for human resources. Mission Council makes all recommendations to the Assembly about the use of resources.*

Convener:	Duncan Wilson	2000
Secretary:	Dai Hayward	2000
4 members	Pat Nimmo	2000
	Derek Wales	2000
	Bill Mahood	2002
	David Thompson	2002

General Secretary	Tony Burnham
Treasurer	Graham Stacy
Secretary for Finance	Clem Frank
Secretary for Ministries	Christine Craven

The Convener must be a member of Mission Council, or be invited to attend. S/he serves for 4 years.

The Secretary may or may not be a member of Mission Council and serves for 4 years. Members must be members of Mission Council at time of appointment, but they then serve for 4 years whether or not they remain members of Council.

### 3. Staffing Advisory Group

*The Group considers any Assembly post due to become vacant, or proposals for new posts and recommends to Mission Council whether this post should continue or be created.*

3 members	Graham Maskery	2000
	Angela Hughes	2001
	Christine Meekison	2002
Convener	Donald South	2003
General Secretary		

The Convener must be a member of Mission Council and serve for 4 years or until s/he ceases to be a member of the Council, whichever is the shorter. Members may or may not be members of Mission Council and should serve for 4 years.

### 4. Advisory Group on Grants and Loans

*The Group is responsible for considering and co-ordinating central grants. It makes an annual report to Mission Council.*

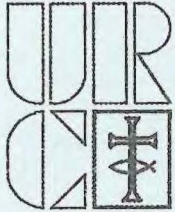
Convener	Simon Rowntree	2000
Secretary	David Lane	2002
Deputy General Secretary	John Waller	
Church and Society Secretary	Peter Brain	
CRCW Development Worker	<i>vacant</i>	
Secretary for Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness	John Steele	
Secretary for Ecumenical Relations	Sheila Maxey	
Secretary for International Church Relations	Philip Woods	
Secretary for Finance	Clem Frank	
Secretary for Ministries	Christine Craven	
Secretary for Youth Work or Childrens Advocate	Lesley Anne Di Marco or Rosemary Johnston	

The Convener must be a member of Mission Council or be invited to attend. S/he serves for 4 years. The Secretary may or may not be a member of Mission Council. S/he serves for 4 years.

**At March 1999 Mission Council we need to elect:**

**A committee convener to Mission Council Advisory Group**

**A member to Mission Council Advisory Group**



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D

Training Committee

## Use of Colleges by the United Reformed Church

The report from the Consultation on Mansfield College which took place on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1998, states that:

*'It seems to us that, however regrettable the consequence, the argument of the Use of Colleges review group (that we should cease to use one of the colleges for initial ministerial education is compelling unless:*

1. (14.1) *'The minimum number of students required by Mansfield, Northern and Westminster is less than indicated in the report. Given that recently they have continued with less than their stated minimum, we think that this point should be checked carefully with the colleges.*  
OR
2. (14.2) *The number of students accepted for training was to increase to a level which would give a substantial minimum entry for all three colleges (see paragraph 26 of Use of Colleges report). The assembly resolution on recruitment may encourage us to hope that this will be the case. However, our understanding is that the assessment process is so far dealing with smaller numbers in 1998/9 than in recent years.* OR
3. (14.3) *The United Reformed Church changes the method by which it funds training. At present we pay the colleges the fees appropriate to the number of students we send. In a climate when all academic institutions are finding it very hard indeed to remain financially viable, the number of students is a critical number for the colleges. An alternative would be to give each of them a block grant, say equivalent to the fee income of their agreed minimum number, whether or not it proved possible to send that many students. We recognise that this would be a very expensive policy change but at some point rhetoric and resource have to be put together and judged together.'*

The Training Committee considered each of these questions in turn:

### 1. The numbers of students required by colleges

Responses from Northern, Westminster, Queens and Mansfield Colleges to an enquiry about minimum and maximum numbers of students may be summarised as follows:

College	Minimum Number of Students	Maximum Number of Students
Mansfield	15-20	30
Queens	6-8	30
Westminster	30	50
Northern	26	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>77-84</b>	<b>145</b>

The following points were made:

- (a) Current numbers of United Reformed Church students studying full-time for the Stipendiary ministry at these colleges have totalled approximately 73 for the last four years. This is just below the minimum stated here.
- (b) In the academic year 1998-99, Northern College increased its fees to £6,500 per student per year (an increase of £1,000) due to the fact that the number of URC students fell below the budgeted number of 30.
- (c) Present numbers are 'bumping along the bottom' of the minimum numbers as stated here, leaving no margin for error if there is a drop in numbers.

- (d) Numbers of students in training have run at low levels in the past (with the exception of an increase in the late 1980s) – so what has changed? In the past educational viability of groups with sufficient URC ordinands training together was not considered. The Training Committee considers educational group viability to be an important issue today. Colleges are also under greater financial pressure today than they were in the past.
- (e) Four colleges could be maintained if fee levels per student rose, but low student numbers might raise issues of educational viability at some places, and would use money that might otherwise be spent on new work in Continuing Ministerial Education and Lay Training.
- (f) Should General Assembly decide that three colleges must suffice and that URC Initial Ministerial Education at Mansfield must therefore cease, the Committee would value our maintaining a foothold there, and has begun to explore creative suggestions for Continuing Ministerial Education linked to Mansfield.
- (g) If the URC was not to use Mansfield College for Initial Ministerial Education, there would be difficulty for some students in South-Western and Wessex Synods reaching a URC college. We are aware, however, of good work done by regional Courses in this part of England.

## 2. The likely recruitment in coming years

- (a) A paper produced by the Ministries' Committee based on the agreed policy of an expected reduction of FT ministers required by the URC of 1.5% per year suggests that the URC needs to ordain, or acquire from other sources; 24 ministers in 2003, and about 28 stipendiary ministers a year from 2003.
- (b) Current recruitment is running at about 17-20 new students a year.
- (c) Ministries is not planning to deploy numbers vastly different from the numbers now. Even if recruitment ran at 24 or 28 new students a year, it would appear that these students could be trained at three institutions. Three colleges could cope easily with 75-100 students.

UN FURTHER INCREASES MIGHT REQUIRE COLLEGES TO DEVELOP NEW PLAYS FOR

manageable

## 3. Funding of Training

the Committee considered the way that we fund ordination training, and took the view that there was little to be gained from pursuing, at the moment, any thought of changing this. New models of funding initial ministerial education (perhaps even block grants) might one day need to be explored. The questions raised in the present review, however, are not solely financial, and are too complex to allow a narrowly financial solution.

### Resolution 1

The following Resolution was agreed unanimously:

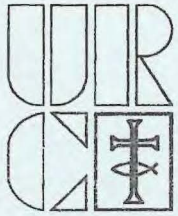
**An immediate move to block grants targeted on initial ministerial education will not, in the view of the Training Committee, deal with all the issues that this review has before it.**

In the light of the answers to each of these three questions, the Committee saw no way of rebutting the case for ceasing to use one of the colleges for initial ministerial training. However,

### Resolution 2

The following resolution was passed unanimously:

**The Training Committee wishes to explore, and has indeed begun actively to explore, other ways in which our denomination might maintain a theological presence at Mansfield, were initial ministerial education there to cease.**



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D1

### The Review of the Use of Colleges

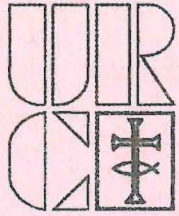
This is being treated as a continuation of the debate that was adjourned at the March 1998 Mission Council.

At that time it was decided to recommend that Assembly should affirm the continued use of Northern, The Queen's and Westminster Colleges for initial ministerial education for the foreseeable future. A decision on Mansfield was deferred to allow the College time to respond to the inspection report, and to enable wider consultation throughout the church.

After a reminder of the issues contained in the various papers on this topic, Mission Council will be asked to consider the four draft resolutions below and in particular to decide which of the versions of resolution 2 (if any) should be taken to Assembly.

- 
1. Assembly welcomes the report of the Training Committee on the positive response of Mansfield College to the inspection report of 1997, and commends the staff and governing body on the imaginative work that has been done.
  2. (a) Assembly resolves to continue to use Mansfield College for initial ministerial education in the foreseeable future, and asks the Training Committee to propose new financial arrangements which will enable all the colleges to which it is now committed to be able to plan for the future on a stable basis.  
  
OR (b) Assembly resolves to continue to use Mansfield College for initial ministerial education for at least a further five years; asks the Training Committee to undertake another review of the use of colleges in four years' time; and in the meantime asks the Committee to propose financial arrangements which will enable all the colleges to which it is now committed to continue their life on a stable basis.  
  
OR (c) Assembly resolves to begin immediately to phase out the use of Mansfield College for initial ministerial, and asks the Training Committee to make careful and sensitive arrangements to enable this to happen.
  3. Assembly supports the conversations that have begun between Mansfield College, the Congregational Federation and the Training Committee concerning the continued use of the theological and training resource of the College for purposes/ in addition to (a&b)/ other than (c)/ initial ministerial education.
  4. Assembly gives grateful thanks to God for the work of Mansfield College, Oxford, in the training of ministers for the Congregational and United Reformed Church ministry since 1886; offers prayers for those who have borne the brunt of the uncertainty of the past two years; and seeks the blessing of God's grace on staff, students and governing body as they plan for the future.





MISSION COUNCIL  
19 - 21 March 1999

E

Training Committee

## Training Strategy for the United Reformed Church

### 1. Introduction

1.1 The **Training Committee** was set up in January 1994 with the remit:  
"The committee will encourage and enable the integration of the training of the whole people of God and to this end will seek to influence the philosophy and methodology of learning; the core content of courses; and the development of resources. It gives direct support to, and acts in partnership with Doctrine, Prayer and Worship, Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness; Church and Society, and Youth and Children's Work Committees and synods and districts, as they respond to the needs of local churches in training matters. It collaborates with Ministries Committee in the training of ministers of word and sacraments, CRCWs and Lay Preachers. It also supports all other committees and task groups, in particular the Ecumenical Committee and the Advocacy and Stewardship Task Group. It also gives oversight to the YLTO and YCWT programmes."

### 2. What are the Priorities?

Within an overall concern for:

- 2.1 the development of learning opportunities for all in the Church, and
- 2.2 the fullest attainable ecumenical co-operation, we presently aim to:
- 2.3 foster excellence in and monitor the development of Initial Ministerial Education and Training;
- 2.4 expand, sustain and develop Continuing Ministerial education, in the Post-Ordination period and beyond;
- 2.5 promote, sustain and advocate opportunities for Lay Training; and
- 2.6 integrate the training of lay people and ministers so far as appropriate.

### 3. What has been done so far

#### 3.1 *Emphasis on developing learning opportunities*

3.2.1 **'Developing Discipleship'** was produced by the Integrated Working Group for post-confirmation groups.

3.2.2 **'Training for Learning and Serving'** was adopted as an integrated Lay training Course for training Lay Preachers and others serving the Church. The first groups taking this course began in September 1995.

3.2.3 It was also agreed that the **'Exploring the Faith'** Course for Lay preachers and others be phased out from June 30<sup>th</sup> 1998.

#### 3.3 *Initial Ministerial Training and Education*

- 3.3.1 **criteria for courses for initial ministerial training** (General Assembly 1996)
- 3.3.2 **minimum standard of initial training, plus requirement of 800 hours of placement**

- experience. (General Assembly, 1997)*
- 3.3.3 *minimum entry requirements for candidates attending assessment conferences. (1997)*
- 3.3.4 *changes in routes through training for Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary Ministers (1997)*
- 3.3.5 *the production of a revised staff development policy for YCWTs and the support of provincial managers*
- 3.3.6 *consultations of Provincial Officers and College and Course representatives*
- 3.3.7 *an advisory role in the use of colleges review exercise*

### **3.4 Continuing Ministerial Education (Both Ordained and Lay)**

Proposals on Continuing Ministerial Education including particular arrangements for Post Ordination Training were approved by General Assembly in 1998, and are now being carried forward to implementation from the end of 1999.

### **3.5 Oversight of Training provided through the YCWT Team**

A revised policy for the staff development of YCWTs and for the guidance of their provincial managers has been produced, is in use, and has been submitted for Youth Agency approval.

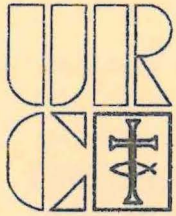
## **4. Future Strategy**

### **A. What we mean to do next**

- 4.1 *Implement arrangements for Continuing Education and Training (1998) - see 3.3.3*
- 4.2 *Work on Lay Training - see 3.3.7*
- 4.3 *Review arrangements for CRCW training.*
- 4.4 *Work on Elders' training - as we have been instructed by Mission Council.*
- 4.5 *Consider more broadly the Church's strategy on Lay Training, and seek to secure some advances in this area.*

### **B. What we mean to do in the next few years.**

- 4.6 *Seek to develop opportunities for Continuing Education and Training for Lay Preachers.*
- 4.7 *Encourage a shared exploration of the training overlap with various committees.*
- 4.8 *Sustain discussion with the Synods about possible areas of integration and co-operation between their varied training posts and the resources provided through Assembly.*
- 4.9 *Develop more regional co-operation in the area of training resources.*
- 4.10 *Review the ways in which Continuing Ministerial education might equip and prepare ministers to take up tutoring and training roles within the Church*
- 4.11 *Keep in view a concern for an integrated training policy.*



**MISSION COUNCIL**

*19 - 21 March 1999*

**F**

**The Report of the Mission Council  
on some issues of human sexuality  
and their implications  
for the United Reformed Church  
in response to  
the 1997 General Assembly's Resolution 18**

**CONFIDENTIAL**

**The United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom**

**General Assembly 1999**



## Some definitions

### Used by the Core Group

A point, which very quickly became apparent to the Core Group and is also noted in several of the Working Group reports (Refs A.5.1, C1.1.2; C.4.2; D.2.5), is the importance of a common use of terms. The Core Group therefore offers the following definitions of its own understandings of key phrases.

The words 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' refer to mutual sexual attraction between persons of the same sex and the opposite sex respectively. These words were originally adjectives; now they are very often used also as nouns, a usage which the Core Group regrets, since it may imply that this is the most important fact about a person's identity. The word 'gay' was chosen by homosexual persons to describe themselves in the 1960s, as a positive adjective in place of the earlier use of 'queer'. Originally 'gay' was applied to both men and women; more recently it has been applied to men, and the older term 'lesbian' (based on descriptions in the poetry of Sappho from Lesbos in ancient Greece) is used exclusively for homosexual women. The term 'bisexual' refers to someone who is sexually attracted to persons of both sexes.

'Sexuality' was originally defined narrowly as a general description of sexual behaviour (and this narrow sense is used in many Anglican documents, particularly the statement and conclusions of the 1998 Lambeth Conference). However, today

A 'sexual relationship' refers to intimate sexual contact between two people involving either penetrative sexual intercourse or mutual genital stimulation. From such a point of view the term 'active sexual relationship' is tautologous, since sexual relationships have been defined as 'active'; but this is also the sense in which the word 'practice' is used with 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' as an adjective. It should be noted that the words 'active' and 'passive' are also often used to denote respectively the partner who takes the initiative in intercourse and the one who responds.

A distinction is often made between 'sexual orientation' and 'sexual practice'. In this case 'orientation' refers to inclinations and attitudes without the expression of these inclinations and attitudes in sexual activity. 'Sexual practice' refers to sexual intimacy, as described above. Some have argued that this distinction is artificial: in the view of the Core Group and several other Churches to whom we have talked, this distinction is vital. This would be particularly so if we were considering the position of bisexual persons, since in our view, if a bisexual orientation were to lead to simultaneous homosexual and heterosexual relationships, this would necessarily involve being unfaithful to one or more partners. 'Abstinence' refers to the deliberate refraining from particular acts or activities. 'Celibacy' refers to a vocation to live a single life in which one's sexuality is fulfilled in other ways than by sexual activity or relationships.

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*References throughout are by report, section and sub-paragraph. Eg. B3.1.6 indicates the relevant sub paragraph in the Report on the Authority of the General Assembly and other councils.*

Loving God,

you draw all people to yourself in the light of your Son.

Illumine our lives that our dark places may be transformed

and the abundance of your grace may be seen

in lives obedient to your call,

through Jesus Christ your Son's one Lord

who is alive and reigns with you

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

## Core Group Report

### Members:

*Revd. Malcolm Hanson, Revd. Graham Maskery, Mrs Val Morrison,  
Dr David Thompson and Revd. Elizabeth Welch (Convener).*

*The General Secretary served as secretary to the Group.*

### 1. Prologue

- 1.1 The Core Group began meeting to draft this report in the season of Epiphany, January 1999.
- 1.2 With the Magi, we were drawn in wonder and adoration to Jesus, the Light of the World. We prayed for his presence to bring light to our path as we journeyed together along the particular road to which we had been set. We sought to bring the gifts of our work to give him honour.
- 1.3 We gathered conscious of people from across the church surrounding us with their thoughts and prayers. As we reflected together, so we grew in awareness of the commitment to the Lord throughout the church and the mutual concern to share his light throughout the world.
- 1.4 We recognised that within this commitment to mission which is at the heart of the church's life, people hold a very wide range of views on a variety of issues. In their response to the Gospel and in their obedience to the one Lord, some would call us to a renewed sense of faithfulness to a traditional understanding of the biblical witness, while others would seek to challenge us to new understanding and inclusivity in the light of contemporary knowledge.
- 1.5 Within the one church, we acknowledge the variety of gifts and callings that are held and want to affirm the importance of holding these together, that the one Lord may be served.
- 1.6 We look for a spirituality that sustains us in our diversity, praying that, as the one Lord draws us to himself, so we may be drawn closer to one another in ways that take us beyond our differences.
- 1.7 As we approach the turn of the Millennium, so we look back over 2000 years of joy and turmoil that have accompanied Christian obedience. As we look forward to the coming Millennium, so we place our trust again in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who ever calls us to faithfulness and new obedience.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In 1994, following the usual assessment procedures, two synods each accepted for ministerial training a person who openly announced that he was homosexual by orientation. In one case he was committed to a partner in a longstanding relationship. In the other, the candidate made clear his openness to the possibility of such a relationship. The issue reached national consciousness in the church when Westminster College, Cambridge, sought the advice of the church. The Board of Studies of the college asked that the policy of the church with regard to the ordination of persons in a homosexual relationship be clarified. In so far as the General Assembly had never debated the matter, it was decided to begin a process which would lead to the Assembly reaching a mind on this issue.
- 2.2 In October 1994, the General Assembly's Mission Council set up a Task Group to work out a process whereby the United Reformed Church can be enabled to hold an informed debate on the matter of human sexuality and come to a decision on the implications for ministry within the church. The Group encouraged the publication of pamphlets expressing different views on the subject. The intention was to start a debate within local churches. In 1996 a paper was circulated by the Task Group to local churches, district councils and synods, asking for their views on the subject. An analysis of the responses church within the UK and elsewhere in the world.
- 2.3 In the light of this response the Task Group prepared a report for the March 1997 meeting of the Mission Council. This offered a number of options with regard to its recommendations to the General Assembly. At the Assembly in July 1997, the Mission Council proposed three resolutions. The first (Resolution 17 see page 6) recognising the serious nature of the issues and noting the lack of agreement, called on the Church to remain united. It also urged the councils to be sensitive in applying the pastoral practice and discipline of the church. This resolution was carried.
- 2.4 The second (Resolution 18) began a process of discussion and reflection of which this report is the outcome. This resolution also was carried. The Mission Council at its meeting in October 1997 set up four Working Groups each responsible for the four issues mentioned: the nature of biblical authority, the relationship between the authority of the General Assembly and other councils, the ordination of ministers in committed homosexual relationships and wider issues of human sexuality. A Core Group was charged with the oversight of the four Working Groups and with reporting to Mission Council in March 1999.



- 2.5 The third (Resolution 19) proposed a way of dealing with the situation during the interim period while the work in response to the second resolution was undertaken. This resulted in a long debate. When finally it was passed (324 voted in favour, 189 against), 69 members of Assembly gave notice of their dissent from the decision. This was the beginning of a period of significant pain and anxiety for many members of the church on every side of the argument.
- 2.6 For church members who themselves are gay or lesbian, the mere suggestion of the disapproval of their orientation and its resulting life styles, is a deeply offensive rejection of their faith and Christian commitment. This is aggravated by the contrast with society's increasing acceptance of those who are openly homosexual. Many have lived for years with the implications and fears of rejection by family and society; some have known extreme loneliness and insecurity. Therefore the whole debate in the church they love and serve has aroused in them emotions swinging violently from the hope of full acceptance to the fear of total rejection. The pain for them has been real.
- 2.7 However Resolution 19, covering the interim period, committed the General Assembly to support the decision of the local pastorate whether to reject someone on the grounds that they were in a homosexual relationship or to call them in spite of being in such a relationship. The resolution also ruled that such a relationship did not, in itself, allow a council to bar someone from acceptance for ministerial training. In effect, this committed the General Assembly to support a decision to ordain a person living in a homosexual relationship.
- 2.8 From the beginning this decision proved to be divisive. The pain of those deeply opposed to this step, though different from that experienced by gays and lesbians, was deeply felt. Some resigned their membership, others led their churches to consider secession, some ministers and their families felt betrayed and anxious about their future in a church which they now saw as having changed radically. Moreover Resolution 19 raised, by implication, other contentious issues, for example: sexual behaviour in general, questions about ordination, the meaning of holiness etc. It also pointed to different understandings and interpretations of the Bible and exposed the tension between people of different theological positions. There is, in addition, a difference in acceptability between the generations. Questions are also raised for parents struggling to accept their children's sexuality. Some people have been obliged to face up to their own experience of a long spiritual struggle as they have avoided the sexual behaviour associated with their own orientation and, in some cases have lived in a heterosexual relationship or, on principle, remained celibate. For them the Assembly decision was a betrayal by the church of their faith and commitment. Where this experience has been coupled with a particular interpretation of the Bible, their pain has been intense.

- 2.9 This ferment in the church has been paralleled by the changes in western society. Some have interpreted such changes, with the greater openness and acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships, as a sign of a more mature and healthy society. Others have interpreted such changes as a media-led conspiracy leading to the break up of ordered and decent society. This cultural context is seen by both sides of the churches as affecting Christian attitudes for good and for ill.

**General Assembly 1997  
Resolution 17**

**Assembly recognises**

- a. the seriousness of the issues of human sexuality and their implications for acceptable behaviour and lifestyles among Christians, and
- b. the lack of agreement in the responses submitted to General Assembly by local churches, District Councils and Provincial Synods concerning aspects of the contemporary debate on human sexuality and the teaching and application of scripture;

and therefore

recognise the pastoral practice and discipline set out in the Basis of Union and elsewhere in the United Reformed Church, in a way which respects the rights of personal conviction and which does not override conscientious decisions in these matters nor use such decisions as a reason for breaking the fellowship of the United Reformed Church;

3. calls on those who exercise pastoral care of members, elders and ministers in the Church to seek ways of ensuring that all those who experience rejection because of their convictions in these matters are sustained within the fellowship of the Church held together by Jesus Christ.

**General Assembly 1997  
Resolution 18**

**Assembly,**

noting the requests made in a number of responses from local churches, District Councils and Provincial Synods for further time and space to reflect on these matters, asks Mission Council to arrange for further work to be done, ecumenically and in consultation with our partner churches through the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Council for World Mission (CWM) where appropriate and possible, on

- a. the nature of Biblical authority for the life of the church;
- b. the relationship between the authority of General Assembly and other Councils of the Church;
- c. the matter of ordination and human sexuality, including the implications of ordaining ministers in committed homosexual relationships;

and also to consider ways in which the Church may be assisted in reflection on the wider issues of human sexuality. To enable this process Assembly asks Mission Council to establish a timetable for these reflective processes and ensure appropriate representation on necessary consultative groups and working parties.

**General Assembly 1997  
Resolution 19**

**Assembly**

- a. recognises
  - 1) that no candidate admitted for training can be assured of ordination until a call is issued and accepted with the concurrence of a District Council;
  - 2) that all decisions on candidature and on the calling of a particular minister involve seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the weighing of the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate.
- b. declares concerning persons in a homosexual relationship that, during the process of further reflection and discussion set out in the previous resolution:
  - 1) no local church or pastorate is to be constrained to consider or accept such a person as their minister nor any District Council constrained to concur with such a call;
  - 2) Assembly will uphold a call to such an ordinand or minister, duly issued by a local church with the concurrence of the relevant District Council(s), leading to ordination and/or induction;
  - 3) Assembly will also uphold the refusal of a local church to call as their minister a person who is in a homosexual relationship;
  - 4) In view of these options, the fact of a homosexual relationship shall not be the ground for rejecting a candidate for ministry during the process of selection, assessment, entry to a college or course and ministerial training.
- c. resolves that in the case of a disagreement wherein a local church still wishes to call such a person, when a District Council has refused concurrence, the relevant Synod, through an appropriate committee or commission, shall seek to secure agreement, failing which the appeals procedure can be applied.
- d. instructs the Ministries Committee to produce guidelines for the application of this decision in the cases of non-stipendiary ministers.

### 3. TASK

- 3.1 At the meeting of the Mission Council of the United Reformed Church in October 1997, it was decided to implement resolution 18 of the 1997 General Assembly as follows:

*Mission Council should remit responsibility for the implementation of resolution 18 to a core group of 5 of its senior members, plus the General Secretary, who will act as secretary. The Core group would be responsible for arranging the ecumenical consultation required by the resolution.*

*The Core Group would oversee the work of 4 sub-groups and would report to the March 99 Mission Council with a view to a report being submitted to Assembly.*

The four sub-groups would undertake work in the following areas:

- ◆ the authority of the Bible
- ◆ the authority of the Councils of the Church
- ◆ ordination and human sexuality
- ◆ wider issues of sexuality

The members of each Working Group were then chosen to reflect the diversity of views in each of these areas held within the church. The names of the members of each Working Group may be found in the report of the relevant Working Group.

### 3.2 Interpretation of the task

At the first meeting of the Core Group, the remit of the Group was interpreted in the following terms:

*The task of the Core Group is to enable the United Reformed Church*

- a. to decide whether or not the ordination of persons in committed homosexual relationships is appropriate,*
- b. to recognise and accept the grounds and consequences of such a decision and*
- c. to find ways of making these decisions in a spirit of openness and unity.*

The Core Group committed itself in discussions to:

*Offer a way forward, which as far as possible:*

- ◆ *maintains the unity of the church*
- ◆ *enables the United Reformed Church to declare its mind clearly*
- ◆ *respects the variety of views held within the church*
- ◆ *respects the views and practices of partner churches*
- ◆ *concludes this period of reflection and discussion with an agreement that the church can accept with integrity for the immediate future*

### **3.3 The work of the Core Group**

#### **3.3.1 Numbers of meetings**

The Core Group met thirteen times, eleven times as day meetings, and twice residentially. In addition, the Core Group met four times jointly with the Conveners of the Working Groups, and organised one joint consultation for all members of the Core Group and the Working Groups

#### **3.3.2 Time Constraints**

Both the Core Group and the Working Groups were aware of the considerable time constraints under which the work needed to be completed. The Core Group began drafting its report when it had received the working Group reports at the beginning of January 1999 and completed the report for Mission Council by the end of February. There was limited time for consultation between the Core Group and the Working Groups about the reports for which each was responsible. There was also limited time for soundings to be taken throughout the United Reformed Church. This was primarily undertaken through a series of articles in Reform in autumn 1997.

**3.3.3** The Core Group was grateful for extensive work undertaken by the Working Groups. The Core Group reflected on the reports of the Working Groups and had discussion with the Conveners about the development of the reports. It was agreed that the reports should be attached in full to the main body of the report.

#### **3.3.4 Framework for the work**

The Core Group and the Working Groups accepted as the basis for their work statements of existing positions held by the United Reformed Church, (on such areas as Scripture, the Councils of the Church, Ordination and Holy Living) as outlined in the Basis of Union or as adopted by subsequent General Assemblies.

#### **3.3.5 Fulfilling the task**

The most difficult part of the task of the Core Group was to find a way forward which would respect the variety of radically different views sincerely held within the church, while coming to a common agreement. The time available to the Core Group did not allow for a sufficiently extensive exploration of ways in which diverse views can legitimately be held together. However, the Core Group was aware of the pressure within the church to come to a mind on the issue before us and therefore the need to put a particular proposal before the

United Reformed Church at this time, rather than delaying a decision until a later date. The primary consideration underlying the proposal to be made in this report has been finding a way forward that would sustain the unity of the church, even though this proposal might be seen as limiting the diversity of views able to be held within the United Reformed Church.

#### 3.3.6 The nature of the task

The Core Group report has taken into consideration the reports of the Working Groups in drawing up its own report. However, the Core Group has not offered an evaluation of the Working Group reports in themselves. The Core Group has also taken into consideration the discussion as whole that has been taking place throughout the United Reformed Church. This report sets out to be a reflection on what the United Reformed Church might now do in the light of all the work that has so far been done. Recommendations are set out for consideration by the Mission Council and, if passed forward, by the General Assembly.

### 4. ECUMENICAL CONSULTATIONS

4.1 Ecumenical consultations were undertaken, both in meeting representatives of churches in these islands, and in correspondence with the Council for World Mission and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

4.2 The Core Group has been grateful for the time which others have taken to share their views and to inform the Group of the situation in their own churches. Meetings were held with representatives of six churches in these islands and correspondence was exchanged with member churches of the Council for World Mission and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Eleven churches from other countries had considered the issue, others had not or were in the very early stages of their exploration.

4.3 Forty-four churches were contacted in all and we received replies from twenty-eight (a summary of these consultations is to be found in Core 10.1 Appendix).

4.4 Of those which had considered the subject there was almost universal recognition that there were diverse views. Many churches continue to explore the issues. Of those churches where this matter has come before a decision-making body, only three have clearly stated that they will not ordain people living in homosexual relationships and three have stated that they will. Two churches say that they will not knowingly ordain people of homosexual orientation and two that people would not be barred on the grounds of homosexual orientation alone.

4.5 The Core Group wanted to discover whether decisions which the United Reformed Church might make would harm relationships with ecumenical partners. The courteous response which the Core Group received to its inquiries indicated the interest held in the discussions in this area by our ecumenical partners. The question of the effect of any decision of the United Reformed Church on ecumenical relationships is a complex one, and would need further addressing in the light of decisions made.

## **5. WORKING GROUPS**

- 5.1.1 The full reports of the four Working Groups are attached to this report, and labelled A - D.
- 5.1.2 Each Working Group was given a set of questions to reflect on, in order to clarify the areas which need to be looked at. These questions are to be found at the beginning of each Working Group report and are outlined in the following sub sections of this report. The questions were given in order to aid the reflection of the Working Groups as a whole, rather than to generate a specific list of answers.
- 5.1.3 At the end of the process of discussion each Working Group testified to the way in which the discussion in the group itself had been helpful, enabling members of the group to listen to each other in a spirit of openness and stay together as a group, while still holding radically different views.
- 5.1.4 The Core Group does not wish to offer a summary of the reports of the working Groups and emphasises that it is important to read the full reports. This section looks at the work of the four Working Groups and draws out some conclusions, which informed the Core Group in its deliberations.

### **5.2 Report A The authority of the Bible**

- 5.2.1 When considering whether or not to ordain people in committed homosexual relationships, it was clear to the 1997 Assembly that the authority of the Bible was a key area that needed further study within the life of the United Reformed Church as a whole.

The questions that this group were asked to reflect on, are as follows:

- a) what does it mean to be under the authority of the Word of God?
- b) how are the different books of the Bible interpreted and applied by the Church so as to reach a theological understanding of particular issues?
- c) by what criteria are some biblical injunctions neglected and others cherished today?
- d) is the nature of biblical authority different in matters of faith from matters of conduct?

- 5.2.2. The Biblical Authority Working Group makes reference to the statement in the Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church as acknowledging the high place given to scripture in this church:

*the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, [is] the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people*

This statement is used by the Working Group as the basis for developing an understanding of the role of the bible in the tradition of the United Reformed Church.

- 5.2.3 There has been debate about what God has been saying to God's people since the earliest years of the church, and this debate continues today. (A2 and A3; A3.2 looks at one of the points of difference between the early church and the present situation.)
- 5.2.4 The variety of ways in which people approach the text of Scripture is outlined in a brief examination of the central texts in the area of sexuality. (A5) Three members of the group have offered differing interpretations of the text of Romans 1, as illustrations of the diversity of approaches that are held within the United Reformed Church (A9).
- 5.2.5 Paragraph A6 analyses the reasons why people in the United Reformed Church hold different views of the interpretation of Scripture, with an acknowledgement of the complexity of these differences. Some of the differences emerge because of the different weight given to the influence of the contemporary culture on our biblical understanding. Other differences arise out of the different interpretative schemes that are held. *In every age those who have found a significant message in the bible have interpreted it according to some pattern, which offered them a comprehensible grasp of the whole scriptural narrative. Without the use of such patterns of interpretation, the biblical story would have appeared unconnected in the extreme, and it is not surprising therefore that quite a number of such schemes have been used in the Church during its history.* (A6.4)
- 5.2.6 It is by our listening together that the Word can be heard to be the Word that God would speak to the Church. *The Word that is listened for is the Word that God speaks. In trying to hear that Word, we do not look for confirmation of our opinion; we are engaged to listen for God's Word to us, not to have God listen to our word to him.* (A7.4)
- 5.2.7 Within the United Reformed Church, committed Christians hold a diversity of views with regard to the interpretation of the bible. These views are not held lightly, but out of deep conviction and of years of wrestling with the texts of scripture.
- 5.2.8 This Working Group concludes - *At present the URC is not of a common mind on the specific matters which are before us.* It goes on to raise the question, *What will be the signs that we have come to a place where the Church is able to make a decision which all its members can honourably be asked to embrace?* (A7.11)
- 5.2.9 The report includes the following suggestions as a response:



*We will find ourselves listening to one another not in order to show up the futility of the other's point of view, but genuinely finding the explanations give to us, even if we are unconvinced by them, contributing to our understanding of the questions. (A7.12)*

*We shall be open and ready to share with one another the sharp edged questions which we feel God to be putting in our own heart. (A7.13)*

*The report also makes clear we are not aiming at a bland acceptance of opposites but at a strenuous striving to find where our obedience in the truth may lie. (A7.15)*

5.2.10 The Working Group gives a clear picture of the way in which the United Reformed Church holds a variety of views in the area of the authority of the Bible. For further agreement to be arrived at, about the way in which it is possible for different views to be held coherently together, more time would be needed for further work to be done.

**5.2.11 The Core Group proposes that local churches be encouraged to deepen their studies of the scriptures in an atmosphere of open listening in order for the study of scripture to come more alive throughout the church.**

### **5.3 Report B The Authority of the Councils of the Church**

5.3.1 In B1.2 the Working Group addresses the question of the way in which the United Reformed Church interprets the authority of the Councils of the United Reformed Church. This area needs to be looked at in view of the discussions both leading up to and arising from the 1997 Assembly with regard to

- a. who makes decisions within the life of the church, and
- b. how accepted these decisions are by those who either dissent from them or have not been party to making them?

The questions that this group were asked to reflect on are as follows:

- a) what processes of decision making will lead to the reception by the whole church of the decisions made, particularly on contentious issues?
- b) what are the limits of diversity in policy appropriate to different councils of the church, which will facilitate response to local circumstances without imperilling the authority of the General Assembly? (The issue of subsidiarity)
- c) what is the extent of the necessity of prescription of any issue?
- d) how may the rights of personal conviction and the safeguarding of the substance of the faith and the maintaining of the unity of the fellowship, as set in para 10 of the Basis of Union, be upheld?
- e) why have certain decisions in the area of human sexuality been problematic?

- 5.3.2 The particular understanding of authority held with the United Reformed Church is outlined in B1. It is stressed that the starting point for all Christians is the God who calls them. The United Reformed Church acknowledges two equal responsibilities in upholding the fellowship of the church, namely to *uphold the rights of personal conviction; and safeguarding the substance of the faith and maintaining the unity of the fellowship* (Basis of Union 10). The United Reformed Church has been open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, in the understanding that the Spirit might guide the church to move in new ways in the face of changing circumstances and in the light of new knowledge. (Basis of Union 18 and 6)
- 5.3.3 *The Basis of Union establishes a balance of oversight between its councils; the Basis gives authority, all the councils of the church participate in the exercise of it and the General Assembly has as one of its tasks the guardianship of the distributed responsibilities.* (B1.2.1)
- 5.3.4 There are a variety of different emphases on conciliarity that are held within the United Reformed Church. (B1.3)
- 5.3.5 There are a number of strengths and weaknesses of this understanding (B1.4), e.g. a strength is seen as *the variety of thought and practice that can often be creative*, while a weakness is *procedures that sometimes militate against acceptance and reception because they have been too hasty*.
- 5.3.6 The Working Group concludes by saying, *our Reformed understanding of the whole people of God being the Church needs to be better expressed in our*
- 5.3.7 This Working Group then engaged in an extensive period of reflection on the process that had gone on thus far in the United Reformed Church with regard to issues of human sexuality. The results of this reflection are outlined in paragraph 2 of the report. The report concludes that a new process needs to be established for dealing with contentious issues. This new process would more fully involve the church at every level in both the consideration of contentious issues and the consequent decision-making.
- 5.3.8 The Working Group makes specific recommendations to the United Reformed Church (B3.3), including:
- ◆ the need to develop reflection, based on the considerations set out in B3.1.6, concerning a theology and process of what it is right to do when radical disagreement harms the peace and unity of the church;
  - ◆ the need to agree a process, such as that suggested in their report, for dealing with contentious issues;
  - ◆ the need to review its conciliar structure with the aim of improving the sense of relevance of one council to another and to enhance reception of decisions by other councils of the church;
  - ◆ the need to assess and explore ways of improving training for representatives in the councils of the church. Such training in the areas of

the United Reformed Church's understanding of church and polity, consultation, decision making and implementation should enrich the life of all its councils;

- ◆ the possibility of considering amendments to Standing Orders and the Structure, such as those discussed in B2.3.1, B2.3.2 and B3.2.1d.

#### 5.4. Report C Ordination and Human Sexuality

##### 5.4.1 In C1.3 the Working Group looks at the question of Ordination and Human Sexuality.

The questions that this group were asked to reflect on are as follows:

- ◆ what does it mean for an ordained minister to be called to a holy life?
- ◆ how far should an ordained person be expected to be a 'role model' in his or her personal relationships, and for whom, inside and outside the church?
- ◆ should the Church publicly recognise committed homosexual relationships, and if so, how?
- ◆ could ordination to the ministry be considered in the absence of such recognition?
- ◆ should a distinction be drawn between relationships involving sexual activity and those which do not?
- ◆ what would be the implications of ordaining ministers who might not be acceptable throughout the Church?
- ◆ if persons in committed homosexual relationships were ordained to the ministry, how would a Christian understanding of fidelity in sexual ethics be maintained?

5.4.2 The Working Group committed itself to *seeking the mind of Christ, in the confidence that God has a will and purpose for our church*. The Working Group testified to the way in which they had found a sense of unity amongst themselves, despite deep differences. *We found that, through our long process of exploration and discovery, although some of our differences were just as great at the end, we grew in the intensity of our commitment to and respect for one another, and became more and more aware of the grace of God at work in each other. We are convinced that there is no substitute for personal encounter.*

5.4.3 The report placed the discussion in the context of the ethics of relationships. *It is as Christians absorb, and are transformed by, the love of God that our*

*human relationships become selfless and Christlike, symbols of the love of God for humanity. It is because some Christians recognise such Christlike love in committed and faithful homosexual partnerships, and because some gay and lesbian Christians believe their partnerships to be God-given, that debate has arisen. Others disagree, for while the ethical practice of sexuality is a question for everybody and not just those of a homosexual disposition, many Christians believe that any physical expression of homosexual love is abhorrent to God and contradicts God's creative purpose. What is the truth?*

- 5.4.4 The question of what the truth is, and how we discover this, is then explored throughout the report.
- 5.4.5 The section on holy living takes up the statement on Holy Living taken to the General Assembly in 1997 (Resolution 21) as the basis for its thinking. The questions 'what does it mean to be holy' and 'what does it mean to live a holy life' are addressed. Holiness is seen as arising out of a relationship with the holy God. Living a holy life means that individuals and communities are always responsible to God to ensure that the listening and obedience are constant and authentic. The Group agreed that there could not be a checklist of rules for holy living.
- 5.4.6 The section on ordination was based on the official position of the United Reformed Church, as contained in the Basis of Union and the Structure of the United Reformed Church (Basis paragraph 20). Despite holding different views on ordination, the Group agreed that on the question of ordination and human sexuality treating ministers and elders separately could not be justified (C3.2)
- 5.4.7 The question of the ordination of women was looked at (C3.3). The report *argues that what is significant about the ordination of women is that the church looked again at particular biblical texts and argued that other scriptural passages, and the whole tenor of the scriptures, permitted what seemed at first sight to be forbidden.*
- 5.4.8 The report looks at the understanding of *call* in the United Reformed Church and at the promises ministers make at ordination and induction about living a holy life. There was not a consensus in the group as to whether suitability of character for ministry could include a faithful, loving, same-sex partnership which may include a physical relationship. (C3.5)
- 5.4.9 On matters of sexuality, the group found some areas in which there was consensus, but were divided in other areas. The areas of agreement were about not equating all reference to sexuality with the issue of homosexuality, and about not limiting treatment of sexuality to considering genital acts only. Areas of difference emerged out of the variety of ways in which scripture was approached (C4.1, C4.3). In considering those areas in which there was unity and those areas in which there was difference, the group was helped by considering the language used in the discussion. (C4.2)

5.4.10 One of the areas of difference was on an understanding of creation and the fall (C4.4, 4.5, 4.6). The question is focused in C4.8 *difference or disorder? Some people begin from what they see as the created norm, where man is for woman and woman for man, with physical union clearly intended by the complementary design of our manifest genital physical differences. Others highlight the naturalness some gay and lesbian people experience in their union, including its physical aspects. The question is whether anything different from the created norm is, per se, disordered..... The difficulty is deciding what is creative difference and what is disorder against creation.*

The report gives a challenge *to distinguish those differences in theology and practice which, creatively held in tension, might be mutually enriching from those which are disordered, destructive and inconsistent.* (C4.10)

5.4.11 The report acknowledges the inconclusive nature of its findings and suggests *this may be an indication to the denomination of the way forward. This is not to suggest that we need to live with permanent difference but it does caution that drawing conclusions too readily and easily may exclude the Spirit of God.* (C5.2)

5.4.12 At the end, a number of points are listed about where the group is in agreement (C5.4), and a further list is given of where the group is divided (C5.5).

## 5.5 Report D Wider Issues of Sexuality

5.5.1 The 1997 General Assembly was also aware that work needed to be done on more general issues of human sexuality and allied concerns. Report D outlines some of the issues that are raised in this area, with some statements and case studies for discussion.

The group was asked to reflect on the following questions:

- ◆ how may the Church be assisted to reflect on the wider issues of human sexuality?
- ◆ how prescriptive should the Church be on sexual ethics and sexual activity?
- ◆ what are the pastoral and moral issues raised for church life by a diversity of culture and practice in this area?
- ◆ how can these issues be set in a balanced perspective for the Church's call to mission?

5.5.2 This group offered an introduction on the context in which we are living in our society and in the United Reformed Church, and went on to develop a theological reflection on the underlying issues. The group identified four principles as starting points for discussion:

- ◆ *we need to acknowledge that within the Christian church we are not comfortable with discussing any issue of sexuality;*

- ◆ *too often the combined influences of society and the church have made us equate sexuality only with physical sexual acts;*
- ◆ *there is a need to affirm sexuality as something God gives to us all and as a gift that can be celebrated in diverse ways;*
- ◆ *we need to suggest some ethical frameworks for the expression of sexuality (D2.5)*

5.5.3 The report continues with a series of statements and case studies on various aspects of sexuality. These are offered as tools in order to take the discussion forward throughout the United Reformed Church. *We have sought to highlight some of the issues and dilemmas of our time, and to place them in the context of our Christian and Reformed tradition. ... In offering stories concerning the wider issues of sexuality we are offering tools for discussion that illustrate how complicated it is for any of us to always know what is the right thing to do. In the use of statements we are approaching the same subjects by a different route which aims to challenge us all about our understanding of human sexuality and relationships.* (D2.6)

## 6. UNDERLYING ISSUES

After considering the reports of the Working Groups and the correspondence and discussion with other churches, the Core Group reflected on a number of underlying issues which had emerged.

### 6.1 Multiple theological traditions

- 6.1.1 We noted first of all that in the history of the Church there has always been more than one theological tradition. Different understandings of the nature, person and work of Christ are clear in the New Testament documents, **although a common Christology was worked out in the fourth and fifth centuries.** This is reflected in the decrees of the Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).
- 6.1.2 In the Latin-speaking West, theology was shaped by St Augustine, with his emphasis on original sin and Christ's work as Redeemer through his atoning death. This tradition was the basis of medieval Catholic theology and the starting point for the Protestant Reformation in the work of Luther and Calvin.
- 6.1.3 In the East, on the other hand, the work of the Greek Fathers placed more emphasis on creation, new creation and the significance of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ as a hallowing of the created order. This tradition received a new emphasis in late nineteenth-century Anglicanism and has become more widespread in the twentieth century, partly as a result of the ecumenical movement and partly because some have felt it more compatible with modern scientific understanding.

## 6.2 Theology in the United Reformed Church

- 6.2.1 Paragraph 18 of the Basis of Union refers to the United Reformed Church's understanding of its faith in relation to Scripture, the Catholic tradition of the Church, and its own particular heritage. Of the statements mentioned in that paragraph, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds bear witness to the Catholic faith, and reflect the common Christology of the early Councils. Within the United Reformed Church's own particular heritage, the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration reflect the Western tradition; and the Presbyterian and Congregational statements of 1956 and 1967 reflect the more open ecumenical approach, though their starting point in the Western tradition is clear. (Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, which is also mentioned in paragraph 18, is more concerned with ecclesiology than theology.)
- 6.2.2 The Basis of Union affirms that the United Reformed Church intends to be both catholic and reformed (paragraphs 3, 6, and 9). The Basis also affirms that the life of faith to which the church is called is a gift of the Holy Spirit continually received in Word and Sacrament and in the common life of God's people (paragraph 12); and that in the ministry of the Word, through preaching and the study of the Scriptures, God makes known *in each age* his saving love, his will for his people and his purpose for the world (paragraph 13). In this way the Basis, whilst expressing confidence that God's eternal purpose is the same from age to age, allows for new expressions of that one purpose in each age (paragraph 9). Thus the United Reformed Church is committed to hold together unity and diversity.

## 6.3 Unity and Diversity

- 6.3.1 Diversity, through time and space, is valued as enabling the church to speak appropriately in each place and time. Unity is prized as the manifestation of God's single purpose in all places and all ages. Diversity is valued, not primarily as an inevitable expression of human difference or the creative tension between different views (though it is both those things), but rather as a recognition that the full truth about God and God's purpose cannot be contained or constrained within a single human viewpoint, however inspired. Only in Jesus Christ, claims the Church, is this full truth about God expressed.
- 6.3.2 The image of the body in 1 Cor 12:14-26 is a classic statement of the relationship between unity and diversity. It is primarily about difference of function rather than difference of view (cf Rom 12:4-5); but the affirmation of inter-dependence is one which we believe we need to hear again today. 'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together' (1 Cor 12:26). The same imagery is used in Ephesians 4:1-16 with the sevenfold unity – one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all – and the goal that we may all attain 'to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'.

6.3.3 This affirmation of the importance of the unity of the Church was clearly reflected in the responses from congregations, district councils and provincial synods in 1995-97. It lay behind Resolution 17 of the 1997 General Assembly. Everything which the Core Group has heard since then confirms the view that we need one another in the United Reformed Church.

6.3.4 The call to unity is more than a human wish. The unity of the Church is rooted in the call of God (Basis paragraph 1) and in the redeeming and consecrating action of God (paragraph 2). This is not unity for its own sake, or indeed for the sake of the ecumenical vision which lay behind the formation of the United Reformed Church. The unity of the Church manifests the solidarity of those whom God has redeemed.

6.3.5 In the past, separation from other Christians was justified on the ground that the true church had to be distinguished from the false church. Other churches were accused of following antichrist, of fostering idolatry, of lacking discipline, or of being based upon another foundation than Christ. Today few in the United Reformed Church would regard other churches in this way, even if we disagree with their practice in certain respects. Nevertheless when controversial issues arise, the same tendencies to condemn those who take a different view reappear. History suggests that the tendency to label others as a 'false church' is usually hasty, often mistaken and subsequently regretted; indeed it may sometimes be a sign of the original sin of pride from which we all need to be redeemed. There needs to be a greater readiness to recognise the seriousness of the sin of schism.

#### 6.4 Belonging to the redeemed community

6.4.1 As the Core Group has reflected on the ebb and flow of discussion on human sexuality which we have studied, we have become convinced that there is a real danger that sexuality will be regarded as the determining characteristic of a person. As Christians, however, we affirm that our fundamental identity as human beings lies in the fact that we are made in the image of God. This emphasis on creation picks up the theological tradition referred to in 6.1.3. We also affirm that God has redeemed us, that in Christ we are made new, thereby picking up the tradition referred to in 6.1.2. Our sexuality, whilst it is a vital part of our being, can never be the primary characteristic of our identity. Judgements based on our sexuality are always secondary.

6.4.2 Redemption is both individual and corporate. Hence the solidarity of the redeemed community is fundamental. Mutual trust should therefore be a mark of the redeemed community. Actions or statements which imply distrust of what someone says are destructive of community, and a denial of the image of God (the one who can always be trusted) in the other. Thus, to be found unworthy of trust does deep damage to community. This emphasis upon trust reflects the affirmation of inter-dependence above.

6.4.3 Christians find their fulfilment in Christ (Eph 3:14-19). As members of the Body of Christ - the redeemed community, Christians enter into a network of mutual obligations, in which others are as important as oneself. The Christian



understanding of self-fulfilment is self-giving, modelled on the pattern of Christ himself. Service in the Christian community is a response to the call of God and the church. It involves putting others before oneself.

- 6.4.4 A Christian's confidence is based on the God, who is revealed in Jesus Christ - the God who can be trusted. That is the basis of Christian faith. Christian humility is based on the recognition that, even with faith, we remain fallible human beings. Our treasure is in earthen vessels. We always have to remember that our judgements are not as trustworthy as God's; so there is always the possibility that we may be wrong, as well as right.

## 6.5 **Marriage and sexual relationships**

- 6.5.1 Self-giving is also the mark of Christian marriage. It involves a commitment to another which carries with it an obligation of mutual faithfulness. Within the context of marriage, sexual intercourse is the deepest expression of mutual self-giving, a self-giving which may result in the creation of new life.
- 6.5.2 Promiscuous sexual relationships (both heterosexual and homosexual), adultery and prostitution are incompatible with a Christian understanding of fidelity. The exploitation of sex, for example in child pornography and paedophilia, is an abuse of power which is unacceptable to Christians. In each case the underlying reason for the Christian view is that such actions reflect a lack of respect either for one's own body or that of others; our bodies belong to God.
- 6.5.3 The Church recognises that human relationships often fall short of what it believes is God's purpose, and does not on that account cut itself off from ministry to and with persons in such relationships. In the matter of homosexual relationships, we believe that, if the principles of honesty, integrity, faithfulness and trust are to be upheld, it would be necessary for the Church to reflect on whether there should be some form of public recognition of such relationships. We note that some churches in some countries have been prepared to do this officially, though none in the United Kingdom as yet (even though some ministers and congregations may have acted independently in this matter).

## 6.6 **Service in the Christian community**

There are varieties of service within the Christian community. Some are marked by the solemn setting apart of the persons concerned, which we call ordination. Ordination makes one more than a private person. In particular it entails the obligation not to be a stumbling block to the faith and life of the Christians whom one is serving. Paul discusses some of the practical problems that this posed for the church in 1 Corinthians. In the course of a complex discussion a principle emerges which echoes the great commandment of Jesus: *let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour* (1 Cor 10:24). The same thought occurs in Phil 2:4, immediately before those words which may have been an early Christian hymn about the self-emptying of Christ himself.

## 6.7 Relations with other churches

A church which is in communion with other churches has an obligation to have regard to the beliefs and practice of those other churches in taking decisions on matters which might injure the communion between them. The churches with which the United Reformed Church is in communion include some which have said that they would never consider the ordination of persons in homosexual relationships, and others which already do so, either nationally or in some areas (see Core10.1). Again, however, no church in the United Kingdom has committed itself knowingly to ordain such persons (apart from the United Reformed Church in the circumstances set out in Resolution 19 of 1997).

## 6.8 Living with diversity

The diversity of views within the United Reformed Church on this matter is reflected in all four Working Group reports. The question we have had to face is, How may the Church act so that this diversity does not lead to division? Our provisional response is that the Church must seek both to uphold the teaching on marriage, sexual relationships, love and faithfulness expressed in the New Testament, and to respond pastorally to individuals in a way which is faithful to Jesus's manifest concern for those cast out by the society of his day.

## 6.9 The Church and the wider society

The Church also exists within secular society, and the law of the land may permit activities which Christians find incompatible with their understanding of God's purpose. The Free Churches, whilst seeking through democratic means to influence government to legislate in such a way that the law does express their understanding of God's will, have always recognised the distinction between the Church and government. They have supported the public recognition of human rights and liberties. They have defended the rights of minorities which suffer popular discrimination to equality before the law. In matters where there are conscientious differences of view, the Church is willing to be open to further study and discussion. But ultimately the Church retains the right to determine whom it will baptize, marry, bury, admit to membership and ordain; that these are not determined by the state is the mark of a free church.

## 7. WHAT WE CAN AFFIRM

The Core Group decided to begin its recommendations on the way forward by gathering together that which could be affirmed by all. The following points are offered for reflection and possible development.

### 7.1 Our identity as human beings lies in our creation by God.

- 7.2 Our unity as human beings lies in our new creation in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- 7.3 As human beings and as members of the redeemed community we depend upon one another.
- 7.4 Mutual trust is a mark of the redeemed community.
- 7.5 Human beings are not intended to be alone: we affirm the gifts of marriage and friendship.
- 7.6 Marriage is a lifelong, mutual commitment.
- 7.7 Honesty, integrity and faithfulness should characterise all our relationships.
- 7.8 Exploitation of other people is always wrong.
- 7.9 Holiness is a commitment to live in dependence upon God's grace and according to God's will.
- 7.10 Everyone has particular abilities, qualities and gifts to contribute to the whole community.
- 7.11 The Church welcomes all people as those for whom Christ died.

## **8. OUTLINING A POLICY**

The further work called for by the General Assembly in 1997 has been completed. The reports of the Working Groups are offered to assist the church in its further reflection. At this point, some decisions have now to be made in the light of

- ◆ the church's commitment to unity,
- ◆ the material offered by the Working Groups,
- ◆ the consequences for individuals, congregations and the whole life of the church.

But there is also the wider context of the life and atmosphere of the church to be considered. The Core Group has comments to make in this area first of all.

### **8.1 Uncomfortable challenges**

8.1.1 The Core Group suggests that the issue of homosexuality, as well as the wider issues of sexuality, presents a challenge to all, of whatever outlook or experience. It also presents a challenge to the whole church and to every church.

8.1.2 At the personal level

- ◆ relationships are challenged - how do I relate to those whose way of life, beliefs and outlook are different from my own?
- ◆ beliefs are challenged - is my understanding complete and coherent, is it true to Scripture and experience, and does it make sense of today's knowledge?
- ◆ sexuality is challenged - how do I express my own sexuality, and how do I respond to people whose understanding of themselves as sexual beings is different from my own?

### 8.1.3 At the corporate level

- ◆ how can we live together within one church when we have such a diversity of beliefs and practices - on this as well as other matters?
- ◆ how can we remain in fellowship with one another, and especially with those who seem to us to be contradicting the gospel or Christian morality?
- ◆ how can we make decisions in this area when our knowledge is so incomplete and when discussion so quickly becomes emotional?
- ◆ how, in our generation, should we respond to the challenges presented to us by a changing world?

8.1.4 Such challenges can be difficult to face and can threaten fellowship and unity. It is imperative therefore to ask how relationships within the life of the church should be conducted and how a difficult discussion like this is to be handled. The answer has partly to do with Christian grace and ordinary decency. It has partly to do with recent experience of this particular issue. All of us need to check our own attitudes and the way we respond to one another. The following points are pertinent for each of us, whatever views we currently hold.

- ◆ We need to take time and trouble to meet and listen to those whose views and experiences differ from our own. We need to let them speak for themselves while we listen.
- ◆ We need to recognise that those with whom we disagree may have something quite valid and searching to say to us. It is not good enough simply to write them off as prejudiced, simplistic, liberal, fundamentalist, self-seeking, defensive, reactionary.
- ◆ We need to re-examine our prejudices to see if they bear any relation to fact and whether they are blinding us to things we are not prepared to face.
- ◆ We need to recognise that questions relating to homosexuality have to be faced. Whatever the outcome of our present discussions we will still have to answer the question - how shall we respond to those who are homosexual, and will that response be in tune with the response of our Lord - or how shall we live as homosexuals, and will that behaviour be in response to our Lord?
- ◆ We need to make it clear that we distance ourselves totally from all forms of promiscuity and abuse and that we recognise that there are some real boundaries to be observed in relation to the expression of sexuality.
- ◆ We need to hear and to heed the cry of homosexual people concerning the way they have been treated in the life of the church and in the community.

- ◆ We need to hear and to heed those who feel deeply offended by these issues and to understand how our views or activity can cause deep hurt and distress to others, and to recognise the effect this has on the life of the church.
- ◆ We need to find ways to listen to one another calmly, to explore Scripture sensitively, to understand one another more deeply and to grow together in commitment to Christ's way.
- ◆ We need to recommit ourselves to one another, as well as to our Lord, whatever decisions are now taken.

## 8.2 The need for a decision

8.2.1 The four groups commissioned by the Mission Council to do further work on the concerns identified by General Assembly in its 1997 resolution 18 have all referred to the tensions with which we are now living and the utmost difficulty of coming to a common mind. The whole church might wish for the luxury of extended time for quiet reflection and even more study. At the same time there are clamorous voices seeking the urgent resolution of the straightforward question - will the United Reformed Church ordain practising homosexuals to the ministry of Word and Sacraments? Others again are hopeful that there might be a swift and peaceful resolution to an issue which has threatened the unity of this and many other churches.

8.2.2 Some decisions are now needed which ideally will help to draw the church together again around what may be an uncomfortable but unifying agreement. It may be worth repeating here the principles (set out in 3.2 above) which have seemed paramount to the Core Group in its discussions and which require some conclusion to be reached. Within the context of seeking the mind of Christ, and endeavouring to be true to the Gospel, the Core Group committed itself to seeking to offer a way forward, which as far as possible:

- maintains the unity of the church
- enables the United Reformed Church to declare its mind clearly
- respects the variety of views held within the church
- respects the views and practices of partner churches
- concludes this period of reflection and discussion with an agreement that the church can accept with integrity for the immediate future.

8.2.3 In the event and after much wrestling with the issues, it has proved impossible to respond evenly to all of these points. Nevertheless, and although there is much tension and threatened division over this particular issue, there is a broad framework of agreement about other issues throughout the church - a point echoed by the working groups. The affirmations set out in section 7 offer an opportunity to celebrate in thankfulness and unity some of those fundamental points of agreement.

8.2.4 At issue here is not only the question of homosexuality and ordination, but the unity and peace of the church. The group on the Authority of General Assembly and Other Councils has offered guidance about how to handle difficult issues in future. Among other things, they plead for a longer period of

reflection before decisions are reached - a comment which is echoed by some of the ecumenical partners. The group indicated their view that in general it is more in keeping with the nature of the United Reformed Church that the General Assembly should only rarely give prescriptive rulings of a kind which could lead to the development of a kind of 'canon law' (B1.1.5). This seems to be one of those rare moments when some definitive clarification is required.

- 8.2.5 The Group on Wider Issues of Sexuality also urges a non-prescriptive route. The group has offered some statements as a basis for discussion rather than as a set of rules for application, but also recognises (D2.5) that there is need for *some ethical frameworks for the expression of sexuality*.

### 8.3 The need for a sensitive decision

- 8.3.1 It is evident that any decisions, of whatever nature, will have profound consequences for many individuals as well as for congregations and the whole church. Within the church, there are now, and probably always have been, homosexual people taking a full, valued, gifted and accepted part in its life. A report such as this, and any conclusions that flow from it, is of enormous significance for them in a very personal way.
- 8.3.2 The 1997 General Assembly, in resolution 17, renewed and re-emphasised its commitment - established so clearly in the Basis of Union - to seek if at all possible to remain together as one church. That requires of everyone throughout the church the greatest patience, carefulness and concern, lest secondary issues become the basis for fresh divisions.
- 8.3.3 The limits of what is acceptable are different in different cultures and at different times in history. The task for the church at this time is to discern its response to scripture and to contemporary knowledge and culture. That does not presuppose what the answer may be, but it does indicate the need for careful study and decision.
- 8.3.4 While people naturally tend to hold their convictions with passion, the shared life of the church requires that passion is tempered with compassion and humility, with a readiness to test convictions, and if necessary to change them, in the light of scripture and growing understanding.
- 8.3.5 For some people this process seems like a journey in which we need to be patient with one another, not rushing to condemn or reject others, not closing our own minds or insisting on claiming our own 'rights'. In the imagery of pilgrimage, we must not lose touch with one another as we travel on at different rates, all the more if the landscape looks different where we are. On this journey, and recognising that none of us has yet arrived, it must be our deep concern to seek to understand and obey the will of God, and to do what is best for the whole life of the church and community.
- 8.3.6 For others, the process may be more like testing the foundations to ensure that what is built has solid ground beneath it. The shape of the foundations may

determine the shape of the building, just as principles should shape behaviour. In the image of a building, we need to be in agreement about what is safe ground for building, lest building on shallow ground brings about not only the collapse of that part of the building but damages the whole.

- 8.3.7 Others again will offer different images, but each will need to reflect something of the range of issues at stake - the life and unity of the church, the shared search for truth, the faces and needs of people known and unknown, the present diversity of understanding.

#### **8.4 Clarifying the main issue**

- 8.4.1 The key question facing the church is whether a committed, practising homosexual relationship can be recognised as a valid Christian expression of sexuality, and whether a person in such a relationship might be accepted for training and ordination to the ministry of word and sacraments. There is no question of widening this discussion to include those who are technically 'bisexual', that is, who may be physically active with people of either sex, since that clearly involves some kind of unfaithfulness to one partner or another. Nor does it relate to those in multiple relationships, that is, who are not in a long term committed relationship, since that too implies unfaithfulness. In other words the question applies to a narrowly defined and particular group of people which is in fact likely to be very small in number.
- 8.4.2 At the same time, there are some people whose situation may seem to be very similar, in that they share a very close relationship with someone of the same sex, yet one which is not sexually, or more precisely genitally or erotically active. There are others too whose orientation may be homosexual or heterosexual or somewhere on a scale between the two, but who deliberately do not express, or abstain from expressing, their sexuality in an active way.
- 8.4.3 In terms of what actually happens between people in relationship, it would not be appropriate to ask directly and explicitly how the relationship is expressed physically. That would be intrusive, prying and legalistic. It would be to investigate one area of conduct and isolate it from others that might be equally significant. (The Ordination and Human Sexuality Group refers in C1.4 to *creating a unique category of exclusion*.) It would also be a breach of that relationship of mutual trust which should mark the shared fellowship of the church. At the same time, the church has an obligation both to affirm very positively the value of mutually caring, loving and supportive friendships, and also to offer guidance about patterns of behaviour which it deems to be compatible with the gospel. It will regard such issues generally as personal and private, and it will not therefore expect to enquire into private and personal matters. But the church must also remind people that they are not simply private individuals, since they are answerable to God and to the community, and since all actions have consequences for others. It will hold out a further challenge to those called to serve as ordained ministers of Word and Sacraments since they have a particularly public and exemplary role.

- 8.4.4 The key question might then be expressed as - can the church positively affirm not only a homosexual friendship but such a friendship which involves sexual activity? For some there can be no distinction between the two aspects, they belong integrally together - a homosexual friendship implies the possibility of sexual activity. For others the distinction is vital. This tension lies at the heart of the present discussion.
- 8.4.5 The arguments for distinguishing between orientation and practice arise largely from the need to assert that the things human beings wish to do, feel driven to do, or feel are by nature right to do, may not in fact always be right or acceptable. Different criteria need to be applied in assessing whether what is in a person's "nature" is appropriate when turned into actions. (See also E2.3.2a) The arguments against making this distinction are based on the belief that loving, committed sexual relationships are valid whatever the orientation of the persons involved, and that it is a matter of integrity that they should be able to express their orientation in practice. The Core Group suggests that since the latter position has still to be accepted, it is necessary to work with the former since it leaves the relationship between orientation and practice open.

## 8.5 Shaping a policy

- 8.5.1 The Working Groups have found great benefit in being able to hear and respect the differing views of their members. While opinions may not have changed, there has been a growing measure of understanding and mutual respect. However, valuable as their experience and their work has been, the groups have not been able to move far beyond the diversity expressed within them and so far from reaching any of the Authority of Confession - have not been able to offer any substantial conclusions or suggest a way forward.
- 8.5.2 The first conclusion to be drawn might be that this represents a true picture of the position of the church. There is great diversity, strong differences of opinion are held and a common mind, at least over issues of sexuality at this moment, seems impossible.
- 8.5.3 It has been argued above (8.2) that this diversity cannot be sustained without being held within some framework of agreement. Decisions are needed so that congregations and councils can be offered some guidance and so that this one issue does not remain dominant and disproportionate. The Core Group has therefore had to consider other aspects of the discussion and review carefully the options before the church.
- 8.5.4 Central to that review has been the church's deep commitment to unity. Within the traditions which made up the United Reformed Church there was in the past a readiness to stand out (and stand alone, if necessary) in order to witness to what was believed to be the truth. Both sides in the present discussion draw upon this history in advocating their views. However, the Basis of Union (see section 6.4 above) requires a much greater readiness on the part of all to take seriously the understandings of others for whom Christ died. As with the discussion of food offered to idols in 1 Cor 8, those who



believe that they are free to act need to be sensitive towards those who are offended by that view (1 Cor 8:9). This is what respect for tender consciences means in practice. Thus a way forward should be found so that none feels unchurched as a result of the current discussion. Every endeavour must be made to find ways of living with different convictions while holding on to Christ. Some words from an earlier generation and a different context come to mind: *Our appeal must be to the Lord of all our consciences, and to His Spirit whose mind is to be discerned from what He does. We declare our readiness to learn and – what is more difficult – to unlearn, according to what He manifests to be His will as His Spirit works among the churches. [The Free Churches and the Lambeth Appeal, 1921, section v (2)].*

- 8.5.5 In its reflection on the different ways in which scripture is understood, the Biblical Authority Group concluded that even now the church is *not of a common mind on the matters which are before us*. However, the group goes on to reiterate the principle that in seeking a way forward we need to stay together, since schism damages our ability to listen and to discern God's Word, and that there needs to be a continuing process of *patient explaining and courteous listening*. Unity is vital to our being able to hear properly.
- 8.5.6 While the church as a whole has very evidently found this a painful and difficult matter to discuss - all other churches which have addressed this issue have experienced the same difficulty - it needs to be said that it has also been a necessary and good debate in a number of ways. At the very least, it has sharpened awareness of some of the contemporary issues of sexuality. The church has to take gay and lesbian concerns as well as sexuality in general more seriously.
- 8.5.7 The debate has also highlighted areas for affirmation. In this regard, it is important to emphasise the positive place and value of friendship - without all the sexual overtones which can so easily devalue or prejudice relationships. People need to be free to develop friendships with those of their own and the opposite sex - such friendships need to be honoured and affirmed.
- 8.5.8 Those who are single also need to be affirmed positively. Some single people do not at present feel an integral part of church life. Some may feel that their sexuality is being questioned. Some who may not have chosen singleness may feel vulnerable as the sexuality discussion continues around them. They have a vital place within the family of the church.
- 8.5.9 Sexuality itself needs to be kept in proportion. It is not the most fundamental feature of human existence. Sexual activity needs to be treated as only one aspect of sexuality and of relationships. It is clearly an area which has significant moral implications, but so do many other aspects of behaviour which do not always receive as much attention.
- 8.5.10 Any decision taken at this point has to face the fact that for a significant number of members of the church, the appropriateness of sexual relationships between people of the same gender has not so far been established. Indeed, for many people homosexual activity remains an issue which causes deep

offence, at its strongest because it is seen as a contradiction of God's purposes and as morally wrong. This remains true, in their understanding, even if the relationship in question is deep, loving and committed.

- 8.5.11 It has also to be recognised that world-wide only a few churches have taken the step of either affirming homosexual relationships in any formal way, or agreeing knowingly to ordain those in homosexual relationships, and that no other church in these islands has done so. While no church tradition should be bound to do only what others do, any decision taken by the United Reformed Church has to be viewed in the wider context of ecumenical relationships such as local ecumenical partnerships, and in open awareness of other churches.
- 8.5.12 Similar considerations arise in relation to the social context, although very different conclusions are drawn by different people. For some the church should be showing prophetic leadership, in response to the gospel, by charting a new path of acceptance - indeed if it does not do so soon it will be left behind by the world itself. For others, it is a matter of showing prophetic leadership, also in response to the gospel, by challenging the world's standards of behaviour and patterns of living.

## 8.6 Defining a policy

- 8.6.1 The Core Group suggests that the policy now being put forward takes account of the foregoing points as far as possible, withholds affirmation of homosexual practice, but sets that withholding within a context which challenges the whole church and anticipates the continuing of the process of dialogue, meeting and mutual understanding represented in the Working Group reports and implicit in the very nature of the church. The policy withholds explicit positive and negative statements, but the policy as a whole is offered as a realistic way forward.
- 8.6.2 It is proposed, therefore, that the General Assembly state the position of the United Reformed Church in the following terms. (This would become the definitive position of the church after testing in the councils of the church and after ratification at a subsequent Assembly.)

The United Reformed Church believes that

- a marriage is the proper context for sexual relationships;
- b close friendships between people of the same or opposite sex are to be affirmed and respected;
- c people of homosexual orientation are to be welcomed and affirmed within the life of the church and society;

and because there is not a sufficiently clear mind within the church

- d the United Reformed Church is unable to affirm the rightness of homosexual practice.

8.6.3 It will be readily recognised that for some this may not be a clear enough statement in relation to what they believe to be the sinfulness of homosexual activity. For others it will be too clear a statement which denies actions which they believe to be intrinsic to the expression of homosexual orientation.

## **8.7 Possible consequences**

8.7.1 A number of consequences may follow from the policy proposed. The following notes relate to some that can be foreseen. Some of these are complex and will need further thought. The Core Group envisages that the work relating to consequences would be taken further by Mission Council in order for a report to be given to the General Assembly in 2000.

### **8.7.2 Candidates for the ministry of Word and Sacraments**

Candidates for ministry should be made aware of the General Assembly statement at an early point in the assessment process and should be asked to declare that they accept the statement. This might be raised in a pastoral way alongside other points clarified during the assessment procedure.

### **8.7.3 Ordination and induction**

The essence of the policy being outlined is that the church, acting as a whole, cannot affirm homosexual practice. This places a responsibility on a candidate to make a judgement about his/her own life in the light of this policy. The process of assessment (involving local church, district council, synod and the Assembly's Assessment Panel) and any subsequent enquiry leading to a call, involves the possibility of appropriate questions being asked about a person's conduct if there seems reason to do so.

### **8.7.4 A minister who is already in a homosexual relationship**

There are a very few serving ministers in homosexual relationships who were ordained and/or inducted at a time when the church had not expressed its mind. It should not be an implication of the policy being proposed that they should be asked to resign. Their position in the future will need to be addressed pastorally. This principle should take effect from the date of ratification of the policy by General Assembly.

### **8.7.5 A minister living with a friend**

In the case of a minister sharing a home with someone of the same sex, it is reasonable to suppose that two such people are good friends who are committed to each other. It is not then appropriate to enquire in detail about that relationship or to assume that it is a sexual relationship.

### **8.7.6 Resolution 19 (General Assembly 1997)**

Resolution 19 (see page 7) set out an interim measure *during the process of further reflection and discussion* called for under resolution 18. If the Assembly accepts the policy being suggested, this would have the effect of contradicting the interim policy. Resolution 19 should therefore be rescinded as from General Assembly 1999.

## 8.8 Procedure

- 8.8.1 The Core Group was convinced by the direction of the argument of the Authority of Councils Group, concerning the handling of divisive and contentious issues. The sexuality issue is clearly one which should be handled in such a way if new procedures come to be accepted in due course
- 8.8.2 In the spirit of those proposals, it is suggested therefore that the main recommendation (See CORE 9.5) if agreed by a simple majority of the members present and voting at the General Assembly in 1999, should be referred to synods, district councils and local churches for wider consideration. It is further suggested that these councils be invited to register their dissent only if they do not wish the proposal to proceed. A negative motion to this effect would require a simple majority of those present and voting. If the General Secretary receives notice by the due date that more than one third of synods, district councils or local churches have voted accordingly, then the Assembly *in its concern for the unity of the church* would not proceed to ratify the proposal.
- 8.8.3 If any negative response amounts to less than one third in each of these groups of councils, then the General Assembly in 2000 would vote to ratify the resolutions by a simple majority.
- 8.8.4 The Core Group suggests as a timetable for this procedure that responses should be required to be received by the General Secretary by 14th March 2000, i.e. before Mission Council on 21st March. This should allow time for the necessary preparation for the General Assembly in 2000.

## 9. Resolutions

- 9.1 General Assembly receives the reports of the Core Group and Working Groups, with thanks to all concerned for their work.
- 9.2 General Assembly
- (a) commends to the church the report of the Working Group on the Nature of Biblical Authority for the Church, and encourages local churches to deepen their studies of the scriptures in an atmosphere of open listening in order for the study of scripture to come more alive throughout the church;
  - (b) requests the Mission Council to consider the recommendations of the Working Group on the Authority of the General Assembly and Other Councils and to report to a future Assembly;
  - (c) commends to the church the report of the Working Group on Ordination and Human Sexuality as an aid to study in the continuing discussions;

(d) offers to the church the report of the Working Group on Wider Issues of Human Sexuality to assist in further reflection.

9.3 General Assembly commends to the church the affirmations set out in section 7 of the report of the Core Group, and draws attention to the *uncomfortable challenges* set out in section 8.1. (*The Core Group wants the advice of Mission Council as to whether or not to take this as a resolution*).

9.4. Declares the position of the United Reformed Church regarding human sexuality in the following statement:

The United Reformed Church believes that

- (a) marriage is the proper context for sexual relationships;
- (b) close friendships between people of the same or opposite sex are to be affirmed and respected;
- (c) people of homosexual orientation are to be welcomed and affirmed within the life of the church and society;

and because there is not a sufficiently clear mind within the church

- (d) the United Reformed Church is unable to affirm the rightness of homosexual practice.

9.5 General Assembly asks Mission Council to do further work on the consequences of this statement and to report to the next Assembly

9.6 General Assembly deems that, with the reception of the reports requested under the terms of Resolution 18 of 1997, *the process of further reflection and discussion* set out in that resolution is complete, and therefore agrees to rescind Resolution 19 of 1997.

9.7 General Assembly (1) invites local churches, district councils and synods to discuss the statement agreed in resolution XX (see above 945) and (2) further agrees that if any local church, district council or synod passes a resolution 'hat *the proposal be not proceeded with* by a majority of members present and voting at a duly convened meeting of such a body, such a resolution must reach the General Secretary not later than 14th March 2000 and (3) if by such date notice has been received from more than one third of local churches or more than one third of district councils or more than one third of synods, then the Assembly in its concern for the unity of the church shall not proceed to ratify the proposal.

9.9 General Assembly urges all members and congregations within the United Reformed Church to continue to take with the utmost seriousness their commitment to one another and to the whole life of the church within the call to be one in our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 10. Appendix 1

### 10.1 ECUMENICAL PARTNERS AT HOME AND OVERSEAS

The Core Group have contacted 44 other denominations and received responses from 28.

What follows is a summary of the current situation in those churches which responded.

#### 10.1.1 Those churches whose representatives met with the Core Group

##### a) Baptist Union

There have been no formal discussions and therefore there have been no formal decisions. However, there are Guidelines for the conduct of ministers, homosexual orientation, whether male or female is not, in itself, a reason for exclusion from ministry, but homosexual practice is regarded as unacceptable. Ministers are expected not to advocate homosexual practice as acceptable alternatives to male female partnership in marriage.

##### b) Church of England

A statement from The House of Bishops in 1991 and discussions at the General Synod in 1997 and at the Lambeth Conference in 1998.

Since 1994 the Church of England has held a series of discussions and, given the diverse views the church continues to explore the issues.

##### c) Church of Scotland

History of related discussions – 1958, 1967, 1968, 1983, 1992, 1994.

1994 – Board of Social Responsibility Report on Human Sexuality

1994 – Panel on Doctrine Report on the Theology of Marriage

1998 – Panel on Doctrine Report – The Interpretation of Scripture

Recognition of the diverse views but no decisions made regarding the ordination of people who are homosexual.

##### d) Methodist Church

Debate on the subject of homosexuality has been pursued since 1976, with reports in 1978, 1989 and 1990.

Conference last debated the issue in 1993.

At which resolutions were agreed

- ◆ which affirmed the joy of human sexuality,
- ◆ reaffirmed the traditional teaching of the church,

- ◆ affirmed and celebrated the participation of lesbians and gay men in the church
- ◆ clearly stated that no-one should be debarred from ministry on the grounds of sexual orientation

but also clearly stated that all practices of sexuality which are promiscuous or exploitative in any way were unacceptable forms of behaviour.

The President of the Methodist Conference through a Pastoral letter called upon all Methodist people to do three things:

- 1) to pause and wait upon God;
- 2) to acknowledge the faith and commitment of those with whom we disagree;
- 3) to recognise the need to learn why others feel pain in these matters and to share in their distress.

e) **Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

Discussion of the issues related to human sexuality has taken place since 1979 but there has been no debate on the subject of ordination.

f) **Roman Catholic**

The position of the Roman Catholic Church is expressed in a paper of 1995 in which the main points are

- ◆ the distinction between homosexual orientation and practice;
- ◆ opposition to homophobia;
- ◆ support for human rights;
- ◆ clear opposition to discrimination when sexual orientation is irrelevant.

The paper rejoices in Gods gift of sexuality and the possibilities of love and friendship underlining the particular pastoral skills and sensitivity required of the church.

### 10.1.2 Churches with whom the Core Group have corresponded

#### **CWM Partner Churches**

a) **The Church of North India**

The matter has not been considered. Their representative has stated that *they live by the guideline that those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church.*

b) **Congregational Federation**

The Federation nationally has not considered the issue of human sexuality with reference to the ordination of ministers. Nor has it been

explored with candidates before recommendation for training or inclusion on the Roll of Ministers since as a federation of local churches it is believed to be irrelevant.

c) **The Congregational Union of New Zealand**

Discussed at the 1991 assembly and agreed that at the point of entry to the ministry a person living in a homosexual relationship should not be called to the pastoral ministry.

d) **Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu**

Do not allow homosexuals in the ordained ministry of their church. Their representative has stated that *Our culture and traditions oppose the practice and we strongly stand on the biblical understanding that male and female were created for divine purpose of procreation.*

e) **The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand**

Have been discussing the issue for some years and currently have made the decision:

to adjourn all discussion on the matter for one year;  
to enact no regulations;  
not to licence, ordain or induct practising homosexuals,  
not to ask any candidate for licensing, ordination or induction whether they are practising homosexuals.

f) **Presbyterian Church of India**

Their representative states that *the Presbyterian Church of India will never ordain people whose sexual orientation is homosexual. It will also be very difficult to recognise those people as an ordinary member of the church.*

g) **Presbyterian Church of South Africa**

Has only recently begun to consider the issue and a report is now with all Sessions for study and comment.

h) **The Presbyterian Church of Wales**

A declaration made at the 1982 Assembly is currently being updated. The declaration addresses general issues relating to homosexuality.

i) **The Reformed Church in the Netherlands**

A statement agreed at the General Synod in 1995 stated that *homosexuals should be wholly accepted both in their nature and in their manner of life*



j) **The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa**

A Pastoral Letter to the Ministers and Members from the Theological Commission approved by Assembly, September 1995. The letter covers a range of issues including homosexual rights and on this issue concludes that *there is much conflict centred around biblical interpretation and the lives and faith of gay and lesbian Christians. Because of this we are unable to reach a consensus on these matters at this time.* The letter also recommends further study and the need to talk with (and not just about) gay and lesbian Christians.

**10.1.3 The following CWM churches state that the matter has not been considered:**

- k) The Church of Bangladesh
- l) Gerija Presbyterian Church Malaysia
- m) The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China
- n) Kiribati Protestant Church
- o) The Union of Welsh Independents
- p) United Church in the Solomon Islands
- q) The United Church of Zambia

**10.1.4 Ecumenical Partners**

a) **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

Are just embarking on a *process of discernment* as an alternative to majority/minority voting.

b) **Presbyterian Church in Canada**

Have spent several years discussing the matter with reports being produced in 1987, 1989, 1993 and 1994.

The understanding within the church as a result of the discussion in 1994 is that the Presbyterian Church in Canada does not knowingly ordain to the ministry of word and sacraments, openly practising homosexuals.

One congregation seceded as a result of this negative view. In addition there is a Special Committee of the General Assembly which is currently studying pastoral issues relating to homosexuality and the understanding of homosexuality.

c) **Presbyterian Church (USA)**

The position is that any person who engages in sexual relations with persons of the same sex may not be ordained.

d) **Uniting Church in Australia**

The policy on the question of homosexuality and ordained ministry is stated in three resolutions which were passed in 1982, 1987 and 1994 and the current policy includes:

the sexual orientation of an applicant or candidate is not and has not been in itself a bar to candidature or ordination

e) **United Church of Canada**

Decisions made in 1988 and re-affirmed in 1990 that:

all persons regardless of their sexual orientation who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, are welcome to be full members of the church.

all members of the church are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry.

.....it is inappropriate to ask about the sexual orientation of those in the candidacy process, or those in the call/appointment/settlement process.

f) **United Church of Christ in the USA**

In 1997 the General Synod adopted a resolution reaffirming *that the standard for members of the United Church of Christ is fidelity in marriage and other covenanted relationships, in singleness and in all relationships of life.* Decisions about ordination are the responsibility of regions, not of the Church nationally.

## 10.2 BIBLIOGRAPHY

*To be added later*