

Celebrate Together – the URC at 50

1. The United Reformed Church began on 5 October 1972 when the decision of two denominations (Congregationalists and English Presbyterians) to join together was recognised by an Act of Parliament. It further developed when Churches of Christ joined in 1981, followed by the Congregational Union of Scotland in 2000. So the URC is 50 in 2022.

The purpose and ethos of the URC is to be intentionally outward looking. We are committed to *'God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the living God, the only God, ever to be praised'*.

The URC has around 47,000 members in about 1,300 congregations with more than 600 ministers. More than 60,000 people worship in our churches each week, including over 13,000 who are under 18, and many more take part in the weekday activities of the churches, including 30,000 under 18's.

We don't all agree about everything, and sometimes agree to disagree, but we are committed to being a family of churches together.

How is your church like a family?

2. We have churches in England, Scotland and Wales (including some Welsh speaking congregations), and around a third of our churches are ecumenical partnerships with other denominations including Methodists, Baptists, Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church in Wales, Roman Catholics, and Moravians. The more we work together, the more we witness to our oneness in Christ.

In the URC you will find churches of all shapes and sizes. Some have large buildings with many rooms and others are small one room buildings in rural locations. Some are very old, others are newly built or refurbished. Many are used for a range of activities as well as worship, such as toddler groups, lunch clubs, craft clubs, Guides and Scouts groups.

When you step inside a URC church you might see banners, stained glass windows, flower displays, pews, chairs, a café, a pulpit, a cross, offices and more. All will display the URC logo, which has been developed over time.

There is a place for everyone, whether it's a cushion, a chair, or a pew.

How does your church welcome people, both old and new?

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3. The URC welcomes all ages, abilities, genders, ethnicities, cultures, and diverse identities to explore, experience, and express our faith together.

We have members from a wide range of international communities now living in Great Britain and host many ethno-cultural congregations. This intercultural way of being reflects God's generosity made real through Jesus Christ.

We have special category ministers and others working in different settings: as chaplains, with fresh expressions of church, and as pioneers, finding God at work in new places and ways. The URC pioneered the ordination of women in 1917. You will find both women and men, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, in all roles, and working at all levels of the URC.

Who do you see in your church?

Who is missing?

Why not find out about some URC pioneers such as Constance Coltman, Ella Gordon, Madge Saunders and Lesslie Newbigin?

4. In the URC we are all invited to come as we are. Some people like to dress in Sunday-best, others dress for comfort. You may see people wearing their traditional dress, especially when celebrating diversity and cultures.

In some churches you will see the Minister wearing special clothes. It might be a dog collar (special shirt with a white strip) or a full-length black overdress called a cassock – each minister can decide what they would like to wear.

As members of God's family, we can all bring our unique gifts and talents, whatever our age to create and participate in worship. URC Youth bring the concerns, passions and gifts of young people and the 1990 URC Charter for Children reminds us that ALL are equal partners in faith and worship. Work is underway to rewrite this charter, moving us towards an increasingly inclusive, intergenerational church.

What do you like to wear to church?

What gifts and talents do you have to offer your church and are they being used?



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5. Food is important in our churches.

URCs regularly celebrate the meal we call communion. Bread and wine will be placed on a table and shared with each other as we remember Jesus dying for us and celebrate his being with us today.

Some churches use one common cup that is passed to all those taking part. In others, Elders serve the congregation by handing out bread and individual cups to people where they sit. In the URC only ministers of word and sacrament and others specially authorised to do so can offer communion. We take communion as part of the universal church, and welcome all who wish to share in the meal.

Some services, like Messy Church include food, as well as events, picnics, BBQs and harvest suppers.

Food is also a large part of the URC's mission and outreach. Many of our churches have cafés that serve their communities, or offer meals for seniors, the homeless or dementia groups. Others are involved in food banks and free meals for school age children.

How is communion served in your church?

How is food used as part of your mission?

6. Celebrating is an important part of the life of the church. We celebrate Christian Festivals, such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, as well as playing an important role in the celebration of people's lives, for example at weddings, baptisms and funerals.

When we do things well, it's good to celebrate it. Local churches may apply to be an Eco-Church or Congregation, or to be recognised as Intercultural churches, Dementia Friendly churches and Children and Youth Friendly churches.

Each year, we are invited to celebrate special Sundays such as Racial Justice Sunday, Environment Sunday and Education Sunday. The monthly Lundie Medal celebrates children and young people who have made a difference by playing their part in the mission of God.

Music plays an important part in URC worship and in 1991 we produced our own hymn book *Rejoice and Sing*. It reflects a special focus on social justice and faith in action in our denomination, as well as praise and worship. A number of well-known hymn writers have come from our tradition, including Isaac Watts, Fred Kaan, Brian Wren and Alan Gaunt.

The URC also publishes an annual *Prayer Handbook*, and offers *Daily Devotions* online.

What celebrations does your church enjoy each year?

Where are the opportunities for new celebrations?



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7. Sharing and exploring the word of God together is an important part of our faith.

A URC service might start with the Bible being carried in, then follow the pattern of preparing to hear the word, hearing the word, and responding to the word.

We share and explore the Bible together, perhaps through a sermon, Godly Play storytelling, café-style discussions, small group Bible studies, and Messy Church.

Discipleship is lifelong learning together.

The URC has three Regional Centres for Learning that provide formal training and education (Scottish College, Westminster College, and Northern College). In 2019, the URC replaced its Training Learning and Serving programme with Stepwise, which is accessible for ALL ages and stages in the URC as part of ongoing discipleship.

From Pilots, serving children and young people since 1936, and Congregationalists developing junior church after the second world war, to Forest Church today, many churches continue to find new and exciting ways to engage with all ages - not least by creative responses to the Covid pandemic restrictions.

How does your church help everyone on their discipleship journey?

**Why not find out more about some URC Bible teachers –
CH Dodd, John Oman, George Caird?**

8. We gather together regularly in our local churches as well as at Synod meeting, Big days out, Youth Assembly and General Assembly. These are opportunities to share our news, make decisions and direct the future life of the church, as well as enjoy fun and fellowship.

Different networks support particular emphases within the life of the church, such as the Group for Evangelism and Renewal (GEAR), Free to Believe, Together Ethnic and Minority URC, URC Spirituality, Cascades of Grace, URC Holiday Forum, Racial Justice Advocates, URC History Society, and URC Guide and Scout Fellowship.

Reform magazine was founded in 1972 as a forum for news, comment, inspiration and debate, and a digital version was launched in 2015. News, resources and information are shared through the URC website, social media channels, newsletters and, increasingly, via YouTube.

Our archive collection, launched in 2012, tells the story of the whole URC from its foundation in 1972 to the present day. It documents every area of our life and is housed in the Congregational Library at Dr Williams's Library in London.

Do you know the story of your local church?

What opportunities are there to be together and share our stories?



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9. In 2022, the URC celebrates its 50th Anniversary, its Golden Jubilee Year.

We are committed to God and each other, to walking the way – living the life of Jesus today, together.

The URC has a strong tradition of social justice and missional engagement. We work with other denominations through the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) to research and campaign on issues such as debt, climate change, refugees, food poverty, and homelessness. We partner with Christian Aid and Global Justice Now through Commitment for Life to engage with, and support, people across the world to tackle poverty, education and climate justice.

Through the Council for World Mission we are in partnership with 31 other churches around the world. Together, we are reflecting on how to respond to historic transatlantic slavery and the legacies of ongoing racism and injustice. We are also becoming alert to the reality of modern-day slavery and our responsibilities to prevent it and not benefit from it.

In local projects, and supported by Church Related Community Workers, we pursue a vision of everyone living in a supportive community, unburdened by debt, and with fair access to all they need.

How will your church be celebrating the Jubilee year?

What plans does your church have for the next 50 years?

10. When we meet together as the family of God, we are offered gifts and opportunities to take away as we leave. No one should leave empty handed.

As disciples of Jesus, we take with us the good news of Jesus to share with others. We take with us faith, hope and love to flood our communities. We believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are for everyone.

At the end of a service, we usually offer each other a blessing to take with us as we go out from worship. One blessing from the URC Service for the Word says:

Let us go out into the world,
as bringers of love
as makers of peace,
as messengers of hope,
knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life,
of Jesus Christ, the way to life,
and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life,
is with us today, tomorrow, and forever.
Amen.

What do you take away from church?



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11. As we move forward into our future as a church together, what is God saying to us as a denomination? John Bradbury, General Secretary of the URC, has written:

“God’s call for the Body of Christ to be faithful is one which invites us to face every new time and occasion with renewed vision. To engage in faithful worship, witness, service, and evangelism in the way God calls us to today may not be the same as what was faithful for those who went before us. Ours is a living God, whose Spirit calls us on.”

In its 50th year, *“it is right that we discern once again what it means to be faithful. Jubilee is classically a moment of ‘re-set’. Are we called in this moment to ‘re-set’ the life of the United Reformed Church better to enable us and those who will follow after us to respond to the call to be faithful?”* (*Toward the Future of the URC*, 2021)

**Looking forwards – what will we leave behind,
what will we keep hold of, and what will we give away or share?**

12. We are not called to be a people who stay behind the closed doors of our churches. We go back into our communities and out to the whole world.

The focus on walking the way, living the life of Jesus today, encourages us to continue to grow as everyday disciples in all that we do and say, sustained by the festivals and the celebrations of the Church. It is about putting our faith into action, learning about God together, deepening our faith and exploring our calling.

Our desire is to extend this invitation to others, to share our faith, and work for justice and peace for all.

Having met with God and each other, refocused on learning to love God with all our heart, mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves, we are called to live as God’s people in the world.

How do you share your faith with others?

How does your church family live out its vision and mission?

