

Paper 11

Reinvigorating the ecumenical vision of the United Reformed Church

Mission Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) General Assembly affirms that Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) continue to be central to the ecumenical mission and vision of the United Reformed Church.b) General Assembly reminds Synods and local churches that joint or ecumenical members of LEPs have always been and remain members of the United Reformed Church, not just those who were members of the URC at the formation of the LEP.c) Recognising that the approaches to ecumenism are different in England, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands, General Assembly affirms the new <i>lighter touch</i> forms of ecumenical co-operation contained in the Churches Together in England documents, <i>A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission</i> and the accompanying <i>Toolkit</i> and encourages the creative use of these resources.d) General Assembly instructs the Mission Committee to consult with the Ministries Committee, to consider ways in which resource and scoping for LEPs and Ecumenical Areas can be targeted, to address the under-resourcing of our ecumenical commitments at a local level and to report back with recommendations to the 2023 General Assembly.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To reinvigorate the ecumenical vision of the United Reformed Church.
Main points	A review of the place and importance of local ecumenical partnerships to the United Reformed Church. A call to build awareness of new, creative and lighter touch models of ecumenical co-operation

Previous relevant documents	Review of ecumenical relations, November 2011 Mission Council. A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission (and the accompanying Toolkit), Churches Together in England.
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Committee; Faith and Order Committee; Ministries Committee; Ecumenical Reference Group; Synod Moderators; the Clerk to General Assembly; members of the Law and Polity Group; Methodist/URC Liaison Group; Baptist, Church of England and Methodist National Ecumenical Officers.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	If the resolutions are adopted, this will demonstrate our continued commitment to ecumenical co-operation at a local level. The report has received positive affirmation from ecumenical partners.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The 50th anniversary of the formation of the United Reformed Church invites the question as to whether this should be a moment to celebrate or lament. The coming together of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches was seen as the start of a process of further unions. We were not expected to be in existence 50 years later.
- 1.2 This ecumenical fervour was not confined to the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. The URC's first General Assembly was held at Westminster Methodist Central Hall in the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Michael Ramsey), and the inaugural service took place at Westminster Abbey.
- 1.3 The URC was brought into existence by Act of Parliament, which was only passed at the end of a hotly debated session in June 1972. The prominent Conservative MP and Roman Catholic Norman St John Stevas, who eventually became Leader of the House of Commons in Margaret Thatcher's time, summed up the ecumenical hope embodied in the formation of the URC: 'This must be seen as part of a wider move for Christian unity, not only of Congregationalists and Presbyterians coming together, but of Methodists and Anglicans... and Roman Catholics... We are moving into a new era... This is a small stone, admittedly, but a stone of great importance in a new edifice. Let those who are committed to the Christian religion get on with the work of unity to which they are commanded by their Founder.'¹
- 1.4 At the time of union, Arthur Macarthur, former Presbyterian Church of England General Secretary and first URC General Secretary (joint), sounded a note of caution. He warned that without the much-anticipated move to a wider unity with other denominations, 'Any union between the Congregational Church and the Presbyterian Church would result in a united church *confused* about its purpose and unable to find a role.'²
- 1.5 In the light of the *confusion* which did arise from not having achieved our founding purpose, the 50th anniversary year of the URC would seem an appropriate point

to reinvigorate our ecumenical vision. Now, 50 years on, how do we remain true to our ecumenical DNA, enshrined in the statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church? These are the words we repeat at every ordination and induction service: *We affirm our intention to go on praying and working with all our fellow Christians, for the visible unity of the Church in the way Christ chooses...*

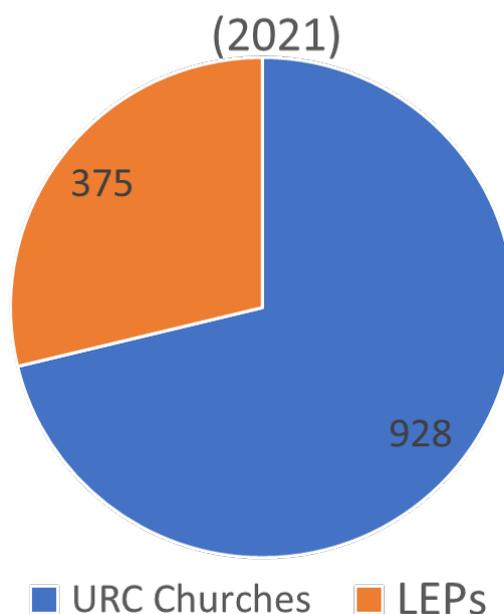
2. Conversations along the way

- 2.1 The last review of URC ecumenical relations was written in the run-up to the denomination's 40th anniversary.³ It was adopted by the November 2011 Mission Council.
- 2.2 The report was the result of a comprehensive process of consultation involving Synod Moderators, Synod and denominational ecumenical officers, members of Synod ecumenical committees and regional ecumenical bodies. The consultation was joined at various points by General Assembly staff, and convenors and members of General Assembly committees, such as Faith and Order.
- 2.3 A decade on, many of the issues raised by the Mission Council report are still more than relevant to the current context.
- 2.4 This review will pick up on two specific aspects of the 2011 report, namely **Local Ecumenical Partnerships** and **new forms of ecumenical co-operation**.

3. Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs)

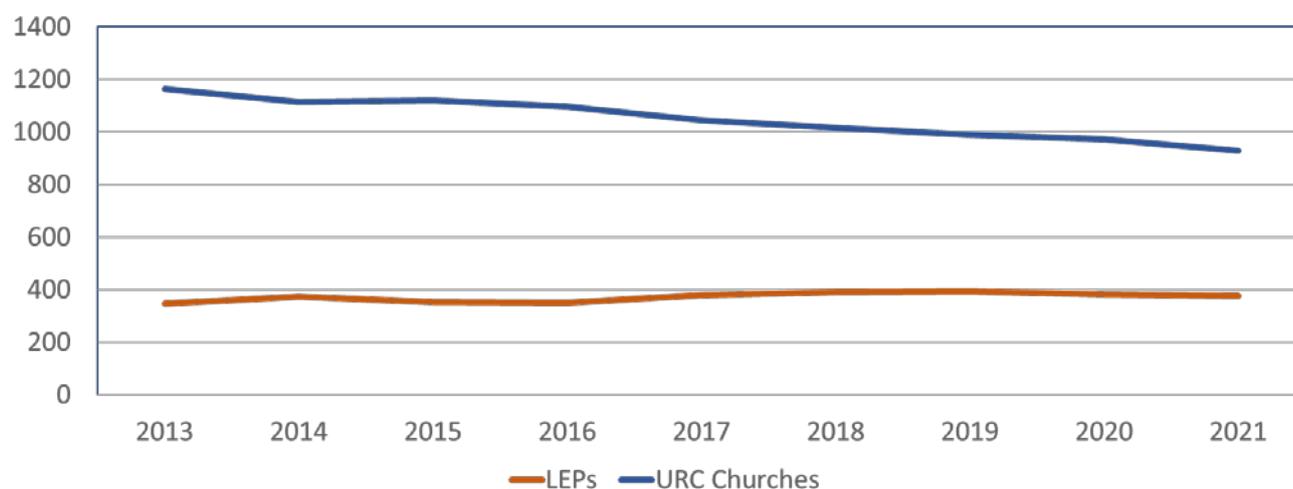
- 3.1 The 2011 Mission Council report affirmed LEPs as *the heartbeat of the ecumenical movement at a local level. At their best LEPs challenge denominations to push the boundaries of ecumenical engagement*. It recommended the creation of new LEPs *out of a sense of mission and purpose* but made it clear that LEPs are **not a lifeboat strategy for dying congregations**.
- 3.2 Despite this positive affirmation, the last decade has seen a neglect of LEPs within the denomination. There have been complaints about their complexity (acknowledged in the 2011 report); a marked reduction in the scoping of ministry for LEPs; and a feeling that either our identity in LEPs has been lost, or the 'URC element' (in terms of members identifying with the URC) has diminished to such a point as to warrant our withdrawal.
- 3.3 There may be a perception that LEPs are complex, with accompanying concerns about the lack of URC identity, but LEPs remain the bedrock of the denomination statistically. The diagram underlines that, in 2021, LEPs represented close to one-third of the total number of our churches.

Proportion of URC Churches to LEPs



An analysis of the URC annual returns for the period 2013 to 2021 reveals that, in contrast to the 20% decline in the number of purely URC local churches, over the same period the number of LEPs grew by 8%.

Decline in URC Churches versus LEPs



- 3.4 Given that LEPs make up such a large proportion of our churches, why do they not feel to be the *heartbeat* of the denomination?
- 3.5 One of the factors is the way we count the URC element of membership in LEPs. Historically, the URC has only recorded a proportion of *ecumenical* or *joint* members in the annual count. In many cases, churches only count the *residual* URC membership, meaning those URC members registered at the inception of the LEP, and who identify solely as URC.
- 3.6 In an established LEP, joint members will usually represent the largest proportion (if not all) of its membership roll. It is an ecumenical principle that joint members are regarded as full members of all the participating denominations. Our

Methodist and Baptist colleagues include **all** joint members in their annual statistics, as opposed to the URC situation where, at best, only a proportion are included and, at worst, none.

- 3.8 This leads to a substantial undercount of the size and relevance to the denomination of our LEPs. At the last available count, we recorded that the average number of members per URC local church was 35, whereas the average per LEPs was just 21. By comparison, the Methodist Church (our closest LEP ecumenical partner) record LEP average membership as 47.
- 3.9 The undercount influences the way we deploy our ministers. To calculate the quota of stipendiary ministers per Synod, the weighting in percentage terms is based on the following ratio: number of members 60, number of churches 40. Put simply, if a Synod has a large number of LEPs and significantly understates the membership in those churches, then the calculation of the proportion of stipendiary ministers for that Synod will be lower than it should be. This, in turn, means that the Synod is more restricted in its ability to provide ministry for these LEPs, and increases the potential to lose URC identity, as well as diminishing the sense of connectedness.
- 3.10 Where an LEP is seen as having minimal URC presence (ie very few identifiable URC members), the tendency is for Synods to divert scarce resources elsewhere, or even to question their involvement at all.
- 3.11 The largest proportion of LEPs are Methodist/URC partnerships. The structured nature of the Methodist Circuit system means that these LEPs will always retain close links to Methodism. URC Synods cover much wider areas, and so their task is harder. For those Baptist/URC LEPs, which have the local resources to pay for their own minister, there is a frequent tendency to opt for Baptist ministry to be able to have one minister for one church, as opposed to a part minister who has to look after a multi-church pastorate. All of the above means that the Synod actively needs to work harder at the relationship with its LEPs.
- 3.12 There is one further factor, which can heighten the sense of separation between the Synod and its LEPs. In the halcyon days of intermediate or county level ecumenism, the denominations delegated the oversight, particularly in terms of regular LEP reviews, to what were termed *sponsoring bodies*. Often, the role of the *sponsoring body* was written into the LEP's constitution. This led the denominations to feel (wrongly) that LEPs were separate to their own structures. In a climate where *sponsoring bodies* and county level ecumenism has, in many areas, simply disappeared or is completely under resourced, this has left a vacuum. In fact, oversight of LEPs was always the responsibility of the parent denominations.
- 3.13 The URC also operates ecumenically through Methodist/URC Ecumenical Areas (sometimes called United Areas). These Ecumenical Areas were set up to share resources between Methodist and URC local churches across areas within Synods. In a sense they are akin to LEPs, but on a much broader scale. Their vision was one of genuine local unity, but many of these Ecumenical Areas are suffering from a lack of resource and clarity of oversight in terms of their constitutional framework. One Ecumenical Area is currently examining how a *lighter touch* model of ecumenical working (as outlined in Section 4 of this report)

could provide an appropriate framework for their mission together, and free them from the difficulties of drafting more complicated constitutional arrangements.

- 3.14 The irony of these practical issues is that the URC, as the denomination historically most committed to structural unity, both nationally and locally, appears to be the least able to respond to the oversight and nurturing of its LEPs.
- 3.15 The URC Faith and Order Committee contributed significantly to the work of this report, and offered this summary: *In the light of the URC's 50th anniversary, it is time to revisit the principles which were so important to us 50 years ago, namely ecumenism and unity. The Faith and Order Committee endorses the encouragement to return to these core values. While the past 50 years have not moved us nearer to structural unity, we can see this ethos being expressed in our LEPs. We encourage all the councils of the church, including General Assembly, to ensure the URC becomes a positive and significant part of LEPs again. Such an affirmation of LEPs would be a restatement of our ecumenical vision.*

4. New forms of ecumenical co-operation

- 4.1 The 2011 Mission Council ecumenical report anticipated a substantial review of ecumenical working which would be overseen by Churches Together in England (CTE), to which the URC was a substantial contributor, as part of the working group tasked with the review.
- 4.2 The CTE review recognised that ecumenical co-operation did not always need to be framed by establishing LEPs. There are many situations where 'lighter touch' governance models can be used to free up the sharing of resources for mission.
- 4.3 The first consultation document was issued by CTE in March 2015, and received both a warm welcome as well as some criticism, in many cases from denominations not involved in LEPs. The working group radically revised the document in the light of responses received. They issued a further consultation document and then, in 2016, *A New Framework for Local Unity in Mission* was launched. In April 2019, recognising the document was no longer new, this was changed to the current version, *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission*.⁴ Former URC General Secretary, and then CTE General Secretary, David Cornick described it as *one of the most significant practical ecumenical documents of our time*.
- 4.4 Importantly, *A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission* offers agreed models of ecumenical co-operation which do not require the setting up of separate legal entities with requirement for complicated constitutions. Constitutional agreements remain part of *Flexible Framework*, but are only intended for the situations where substantial resource sharing is required.
- 4.5 To help with the interpretation of *Flexible Framework*, during lockdown 2020 the URC, Methodist, Baptist and Church of England national ecumenical officers (building on work from the county ecumenical officers) produced a *Toolkit* to accompany *Flexible Framework*. The *Toolkit*⁵ (designed and published by URC Communications) outlines a process in which churches can select the most appropriate agreement for their joint working. It is a *significant* and *practical* way of enabling local ecumenical co-operation in the lightest touch way possible, while also ensuring that churches are aware of their responsibilities.

- 4.6 Although developed by Churches Together in England and its member churches, *Flexible Framework* is a model of ecumenical working that can be applied beyond the English borders. While local approaches to ecumenism are contextual, *Flexible Framework* has the potential to facilitate initiatives in Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands.
- 4.7 There is a further means of ecumenical co-operation introduced by URC Ministries in 2021, which brought in a change to the system of providing certificates of limited service. It is now possible for a minister of another denomination to take a 50% or less appointment in a Synod without that post being counted against their deployment figures. The ecumenical sharing of ministry brings the advantage of deployment taking place in more localised areas. As the overall number of ministers reduces in all denominations (this an issue shared by all our ecumenical partners, and is not limited to the URC), we face the situation that ministers are stretched across wider geographical areas. If ministry could be scoped ecumenically, this would allow for more local concentration, as happens in the ecumenical county of Cumbria.

5. Summary

- 5.1 In our 50th anniversary year, there will be the inevitable questions about whether we have failed in our ecumenical endeavours. To an extent, this is an unfair critique. Not only did we achieve a successful union between Congregationalists and Presbyterians, but in 1981 the Churches of Christ joined the URC, followed by, at the turn of the millennium, the Congregational Church in Scotland. As can be seen by the endorsement of ecumenical partners at our inception in 1972, the dream of full structural unity was not limited to the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. If there is a failure, then it is a collective one across the wider church.
- 5.2 While full structural unity might not have been achieved, we have still shown our commitment to ecumenism by the fact that we, the smallest of the historic denominations, have consistently shown a willingness to unite at local level. We have a greater proportion of LEPs, in relation to our overall size, than any of our ecumenical partners.
- 5.3 Where some criticism might be attached, is the way in which we appear to have lost confidence in our LEPs, which surely should continue to be the *heartbeat* of the ecumenical movement and of the URC itself. The undervaluing and consequent under resourcing of LEPs deserves to be addressed. LEPs not only should have an important place in the URC, but in terms of their potential they, along with new and more flexible ecumenical ways of working, offer a genuine answer for the denomination's mission at a local level as we look to the next 50 years.
- 5.5 The resolutions to General Assembly reflect a commitment to reinvigorate our ecumenical vision.

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