

Paper N1

Church Life Review update

Church Life Review Group

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The General Secretary john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Consultation.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To update General Assembly on the progress of the Church Life Review, and to consult on ongoing work.
Main points	<p>The Theos research into what makes for flourishing in local United Reformed Church is ongoing, and will conclude in the first half of 2023.</p> <p>The Forensic Accounting research is underway, and Synods and the General Assembly have been providing financial data.</p> <p>There is a range of Governance issues that the denomination needs to address.</p> <p>There is a need for significant assistance to help churches and Synods with the burdens of compliance, and to free them for the worship, witness, service and evangelism that is at the heart of the vocation of the Church.</p> <p>There is a need to be realistic about when a local congregation is struggling to the point they cannot realistically function, to provide options for congregations in that situation, as well as at times recognising when congregations need to bring their lives to an end.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Assembly Executive Report.
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	
External (eg ecumenical)	

Tending the vineyard

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit... I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing' [John 15: 1-2, 5].

The image of the vineyard and the vine runs throughout scripture. Psalm 80 uses the remarkable image of the People of God, Israel as a vine.

'You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.'

In a vineyard in one of Jesus' parables in Luke's Gospel, we find a fig tree, perhaps a little out of place.

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

God has an expectation that the Church will be fruitful. To be fruitful requires digging out, fertilising, and pruning.

The Church Life Review Group has landed on this image of tending the vineyard (in which we find things that we might not think belong, like olive trees!). The call of the church is to be the branches of the vine that is Christ which is tended by God the vinegrower. The fruits of the vine are found primarily in the congregations of the United Reformed Church, the wine they produce being transformative for the communities they serve. The fruits are in making disciples, and nourishing disciples in the life of worship, witness, service and evangelism of the Church.

We do not see our work as telling the United Reformed Church how to make the wine of the Kingdom. That is, rightly, the vocation of our local churches, who know their own contexts and their needs. We do see it as our task to help the Church discern what God the vinegrower requires from us by way of tending the soil, and pruning. Our remit, to examine the life, the structures and the resources of the United Reformed Church, is not a glamorous one. We believe that by tending to issues we frequently prefer to avoid because they are unexciting or difficult, like money, governance and compliance and give ourselves permission to stop some of the less fruitful and more burdensome activities – we should seek not to resist but to actively co-operate with God's pruning.

This report is very much a 'work in progress' report, and a report on which we are seeking to consult the General Assembly while other pieces of work are ongoing, and other consultations taking place.

Key issues for the longer term

There are some key issues that we are very aware of needing to address, and which we are not addressing directly in the first instance, because we believe to do so wisely requires the outcomes of ongoing work first.

Deployment and the Ministry and Mission Fund

There is a sense that the deployment of stipendiary ministry has become dysfunctional. However faithfully we try to respond to the challenges of deployment with mission as the focus, the lived reality for local congregations and for stipendiary ministers is that 'the jam is spread ever thinner'. In the context of a faster rate of the decline of numbers of serving Elders and others in congregations than ministers, there are fewer active volunteers ministering, which places greater pressures on stipendiary ministers, at the same time that ministers face working with ever-greater numbers of congregations. Too many local churches feel they are only just doing the bare minimum to keep going. Too many ministers feel all they can do is help keep churches going, not engage in leading churches in their mission to the world as they promise to do at ordination. There will be no easy answers to this question, but until we have much clearer information about the financial resources available to the family of the United Reformed Church it is hard to directly address the issue. The answers will lie in a combination of increased use of paid workers in church life, and more intentional and deployed use of lay ministry, as well as finding ways to prioritise those places that may most benefit from stipendiary ministry.

Significant changes to patterns of ministry, which may become yet more significant in time, can undermine the current rationale for the way the Ministry and Mission fund works, and the way in which Synods calculate M&M payments. There is a deep commitment in the URC to the idea that we contribute as we are able, and receive as we need. We will need to consider carefully as a church how that principle is most effectively worked out in the current context of deployment, which is vastly different from that which pertained in 1972. When we have a clearer idea of what local churches believe is required for their flourishing through the Theos research and wider consultation (see below), and we have a better understanding of the resources of the family of the United Reformed Church, only then do we believe we will be able to address these issues.

Compliance and property

We are profoundly aware of the way in which the burden of compliance in things such as safeguarding, health and safety, employment legislation, charity commission requirements and the like are becoming an overwhelming burden for many churches, as well as for Synods. We are aware as a group that the local churches we are members of, or engage with in our various roles in church life, struggle with this. Presently, support for local churches in these areas is limited. We have limited national resources by way of guidance, pro-forma documents and the like, and quite a lot of what there is ends up developed 13 times over by the Synods. These things matter hugely – indeed, that people are peaceful and safe, enjoy protection from harm, and are treated fairly and justly are gospel matters – in that sense 'compliance' does an injustice to them. These issues, having manifested through the development of legal requirements over the 50 year history of the URC, has led to them being experienced as a huge burden.

The way the United Reformed Church was conceived, the Councils of the Church are concerned with the functions of being the church: worshipping, discipling, evangelising and serving. Synod Trust Companies were set up primarily to deal with matters of property. In the absence of these compliance matters finding a 'home' within our structures to truly support all the councils of the Church in their work, this leaves local

churches, Synods and, to an extent the General Assembly, floundering under the weight of these issues. There is a need to liberate the roots of the vine from the clay of compliance, allowing the vine to absorb the nutrients of the gospel as a church, while ensuring these matters of safety and justice the law requires of us are tended to. How this can be done can only be fully explored when we have a clear idea of the resources available throughout the United Reformed Church, and have given thought to the structures that might provide it. We have a vision that every local church would receive personalised assistance from someone who was able to come to them, assist in assessing their compliance needs, furnish them with the advice and resources necessary to meet those needs, and work with them on ensuring everything was appropriately in order. For many local churches, this would be liberating – liberating them for the work of growing disciples. It could also be liberating for Synods to be freed from the need to be concerned with these matters, leaving them to support local churches in their worship, witness, service and evangelism – as is their vocation in the structure of the United Reformed Church. Realising such a vision would take a concerted effort, and considerable resources. We believe this will be possible, and that the work we're doing on forensic accounting and governance will help work out how.

Another major issue for many local churches is the management of their property. Some of our most thriving congregations, interestingly, do not have buildings, and this is something some local churches would do well to consider. Many of our buildings are a glorious gift for the purposes of the work of the church, but their upkeep and development can become a real burden. Currently, responsibilities for buildings sit between the Trustees of the buildings, who hold much of the legal responsibility, and local churches themselves, who hold much of the day-to-day management responsibility (delegated to them by the trustees). Many Synods and Synod Trust companies work hard to support local churches in supporting their buildings. What is possible varies from Synod to Synod. We also manage different sorts of property in different ways. Many Synods now have responsibility for the maintenance of manse stock through manse schemes, whereas local churches are largely responsible for the upkeep of places of worship. We believe we need to ask questions about how we best manage the buildings of the family of the United Reformed Church. Again, it is in the light of the outcome of the forensic accounting and our work on governance that we believe that we will best be able to address this.

Initiating new work

We are aware the United Reformed Church family has planted relatively few new mission projects or congregations in the past few decades. The Special Category Ministry scheme was one way in which the Church tried to encourage new work, and while individuals have had ministries that have borne fruit, new communities of discipleship have not often emerged. A review of the outcomes of the Special Category Ministry scheme is underway. We have a vision of a much more integrated approach to church planting that may be able to restore the balance of places where the United Reformed Church is present (our essentially congregational approach to church closures meaning that there has, seemingly, been a significant pull-back of our ministry in areas of deprivation). We might also want to think about a variety of new pieces of work: that might be with young people, or involve us in greater community work, or see a significant gear-change in our response to the environmental crisis. Any new piece of work would require an ability to join up our human and financial resources in ways that are currently difficult. Again, we hope that our ongoing work will enable us to dream dreams, catch visions, and allow the vine to sprout new fruit, but this will only be possible when we much better able to discern what resources we have, to enable us to

make choices about how we use them, and have governance structures that allow us to take decisions we then can follow through with.

Ongoing work

Theos research project

As agreed at Assembly Executive, work is now underway with Theos, who are researching, using primarily qualitative methods, the identity of United Reformed Churches, what flourishing looks like for United Reformed Churches, and what resources are necessary or desirable to enable congregations and members to flourish. This will consist of ten case studies (some of which will be groups of local churches to give a wider spread of data), each consisting of ten qualitative interviews. This will be supported by background data from existing sources, and hopefully some quantitative data too.

This work will be complete by Spring 2023, and emerging outcomes will be available to the Church Life Review Group as they emerge. There is a small steering group, with staff time being given by Steve Summers (the Development Worker for CRCW and SCM Ministries).

Forensic accountancy project

At the time of writing, a template has been drafted of the headings it will be useful to analyse the income and expenditure of the General Assembly and Synods against. This has been refined in two workshops drawing together representatives of the Synods and Assembly finance teams, to ensure that the template will give the results needed, and that it is realistic to work with from the data that everyone holds.

Once the data are in, it will be possible for MKS to analyse it in ways that will tell us, for the first time ever, what we spend as a whole Church on each aspect of Church life. It should enable us as the family of the United Reformed Church to reflect on where our current priorities are in terms of our use of money, and give us the opportunity to reflect on where we would like them to be. It should provide insight into where useful economies of scale could be possible. It may also indicate areas where it would prove useful to do more detailed financial research to benchmark our use of resources against similar charitable organisations to help us gain a sense of where our expenditure may be out of kilter, or resources could be released for new work.

The theology of money

A small group has been appointed to help produce some initial material to enable us, as the family of the United Reformed Church, to think about what scripture and our faith has to say to us about the way in which we used our financial resources. A brief examination of General Assembly reports suggest that while we have given careful thought to our investment policies, and have, at times, paid attention to economic matters in relation to justice issues within society as a whole, we have never reflected ourselves on how our faith commitments shape our own use of the financial resources we have at our disposal. Clearly, as a Church we need to think with wisdom and care about how we wish in the future to use our financial resources. It is hoped this piece of work will enable us to do this in a biblically and theologically informed way.

Thinking about the future in a year of jubilee

Part of our considerations have been about how we consult with the United Reformed Church in the widest way possible. To this end, material is being prepared, that is rooted in some of the worship and reflection we will engage with in General Assembly 2022.

Material is being provided for local churches to use in the autumn. Reformation Sunday (30 October) is being suggested, but we are aware local churches may be marking our Jubilee in various ways locally, and they will want to work this into their activities in a way that makes sense for them. The Daily Devotions Sunday Service that week will focus on helping us think through questions around the future of the church, rooted in the theme of jubilee. We are planning a means by which online feedback will be possible as local congregations consider key questions. Paper feedback will be a possibility, too. We are exploring ways that feedback may be made as widely available as possible to stimulate conversation across the whole church. We will then attempt to collate the feedback to inform our ongoing work. The aim of this is fairly wide-ranging reflection on what we celebrate about the United Reformed Church, what we'd like to be liberated from, and to do some dreaming – if we had £50 million to spend as a Church, marking the first 50 years of the United Reformed Church, what might we spend it on? It is hoped open questions of this variety will stimulate reflection, and give people scope to contribute to the ongoing conversation as they wish.

The minimum requirements for being a Church

The group has been working on the baseline for a local church to meet statutory and denominational requirements as a full congregation of the United Reformed Church but, more importantly, what needs to be in place to see our congregations flourishing with active disciples engaged in mission in the world. In some cases, this could be possible through leaving the burden of buildings or gaining people-resources from other places – such as sharing the role of Treasurer or Church Safeguarding Co-ordinator with another church, or having support provided at Synod level. In other cases, we can expect to see transformative new beginnings through coming under the umbrella of another local church – perhaps something akin to the Methodist system of becoming a 'Class' of another church, maintaining a worshipping presence in a locality but joining with another church to share teaching (discipleship) and in mission.

A draft paper has been written and sent for consultation with the Synod Moderators. On the basis of the feedback received, we will take the work forward, and bring a revised document to a future meeting of General Assembly or Assembly Executive with some recommendations for action.

Governance concerns

The Law and Polity Advisory Group has been working on a range of issues around the formal relationships between Synods and their associated Trust Companies. This has also concerned matters surrounding the interpretation of the United Reformed Church Acts of Parliament concerning the disposal of properties. In the light of more general concerns about governance issues, the United Reformed Church Trust is proactively now working on a range of issues regarding governance. In the light of a protracted legal case in an employment tribunal, a range of governance matters have been advised upon for us by legal counsel. This has highlighted concerns across the board about our ability to securely handle compliance matters, and to ensure that our responsibilities to the relevant charitable legislative and oversight bodies are effectively met. The history of how charity registration was engaged with when Church bodies with a turnover of more than £100,000 were required to register has left us with a legacy of complexity at Synod and General Assembly level (there is greater transparency in arrangements at local level, fortunately). It was determined that Charitable Trusteeship for Synods and the General Assembly should be lodged in the pre-existing charitable trust companies that held the properties of the URC in trust. These, however, are vehicles primarily concerned with the holding of buildings and land in trust, and not charitable trusteeship in terms of the governance of the activities undertaken with charitable funds. It is here

that issues of compliance have often fallen between stools in ways that are unhelpful. The concern has also been flagged that the more assistance the wider councils of the church give to local churches around matters of compliance (see the aspiration stated above about what local churches might wish to experience from the wider Church), the greater the possibility is that the wider councils of the Church expose themselves to liabilities for things that happen in the local context. It would be possible to find ways to give such support to local churches that avoid this, and this needs active exploration. There is a general concern that in places within the life of the United Reformed Church, the authority to act, and the liability for such action, do not rest in the same place, leading to unsustainable risks. This needs careful attention.

Consultation on finance, property and governance issue

The Law and Polity Advisory Group has expressed the intention of holding a consultation between all Synods and Synod Trust Companies to share the results of some of the work on Governance that has been done, and to engage with questions surrounding governance and compliance issues. There is a very high overlap between these issues and the financial issues that are being explored in the forensic accounting, as well as overlap among many of the individuals concerned with these areas of church life in Synods and nationally. At the time of writing this report, it is hoped that a joint consultation hosted by LPAG and the Church Life Review Group will bring together representatives of Synods, Synod Trust Companies, and the URC Trust. We believe it would be fruitful to bring together those in the denomination with specific responsibilities for the oversight of property, finance and governance issues to receive and reflect on the results of the forensic accounting, governance work, and concerns about liabilities. The property and money of the United Reformed Church are held in (at least) 14 main legal entities, the URC Trust and the 13 Synod Trust companies. There has never been any attempt to bring representatives of all of those bodies together to share common concerns, determine areas of common interest, and to explore possible areas for future collaboration. We are already aware of governance issues that require attention, and will by later this year have a more transparent picture of the finances of the United Reformed Church at Synod and General Assembly level. Any attempt to discern what constructive actions we might take will require a high degree of collaboration and consensus among these 14 different legal bodies. It is our hope to hold a 48-hour consultation, with the aim of building relationships and trust, seeking common recognition of the challenges we face, sharing key information arising from the work of LPAG on governance issues to find common ways forward that will leave our governance on a stronger footing and reduce associated risks, and jointly to explore the outcome of the forensic accounting with the aim of exploring commonalities and differences, possible economies of scale through joint working, and the like.