

Synod Moderators' report

Synod Moderators

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Steve Faber moderator@urcwestmidlands.org.uk
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Introduction

In our report to last year's General Assembly, we spoke of the changing season for life – we were in the midst of a global pandemic that had shaken our practice and self-understanding deeply. We were in the midst of it – living it – but we could not know if we were in the middle of it – halfway through, with the dawn of the new day emerging at the horizon. We spoke of being in a time of liminality, an inbetween time of change.

We might make many of the same points. At the time of writing, even in these islands with the privilege of easy access to vaccines and a high uptake rate, the pandemic is not over.

An ecumenical colleague observed that the Church has 'long Covid'. We know how many of our members, friends and family members are living with that syndrome, and despite having been clear of infection for many months, they are still living with the sense of exhaustion. The same is true in our churches, where the stresses of living with and/or in fear of the potentially deadly virus has left many wrung out. This is both an emotional and a spiritual malaise. Many of our congregations have had key people die, dearly loved members and adherents, and a great many others find that they are not yet ready, willing or able to return to the areas of service they had been involved with previously, for a whole variety of reasons. Some never will: they have found a break point for service that they were already tired of before Covid-19, or they hadn't realised how tired they were and now, having stopped, find they simply don't have the energy to resume. The landscape has changed forever, and we find ourselves more deeply embedded in an unfamiliar land.

We are in our Golden Jubilee year, and in many other walks of life, a 50th anniversary might be time to slow down, reflect with thanksgiving on what has been, and glide into a peaceful existence. We must certainly give thanks and appreciate what has brought us thus far, but there is no retirement plan in mind here. It may be just one of those stories we like to tell ourselves that the URC was born to die, but our conviction is that God still wants us to live.

On the move

God who sets us on a journey
to discover, dream and grow,
lead us as you led your people
in the desert long ago;
journey inward, journey outward

Synod Moderators report

stir the spirit, stretch the mind,
love for God and self and neighbour
marks the way that Christ defined.

We are called to be a people on the move. The Bible is full of accounts of people moving on. Some do so willingly, some very reluctantly with a huge burden for what they are called to leave behind. Some travel knowing where they are headed, others told to set out and God would show them the way as they travelled. Within our own heritage, our 17th century forebears were ejected from their living: our non-conformist roots, we might argue, show that we were never intended to be fixed in one place with one way of doing things. Could it be that Joy Dine's hymn will help us to discover this afresh? Our 'travelling, wandering race, the people of God' (from '*Moses, I know you're the man*', Estelle White) are supposed to discover, dream and grow. What is stopping us? It is safe for us to journey outward as we seek to live the life God intends for God's people, for we do not travel alone.

We are supposed to discover, dream and
grow. What is stopping us?

Lord, to whom shall we go?

Exploration brings new insights,
changes, choices we must face;
give us wisdom in deciding,
mindful always of your grace;
should we stumble, lose our bearings,
find it hard to know what's right,
we regain our true direction
focused on the Jesus light.

In this exploration of the unknown, are we facing the right direction? Are we 'looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb 12:2 NRSV)? He has, 'the words of eternal life; we have come to believe and know that [He] is the Holy One of God' (John 6:68f NRSV). We pause to ask you to ask yourselves how true is that? How true is it that we both know and believe that Jesus is the Holy One who will lead us faithfully? Does that give us more confidence to undertake our journey? We suggest that it should.

How true is it that we both know and
believe that Jesus is the Holy One who
will lead us faithfully?

We can't stay where we are

End our longing for the old days,
grant the vision that we lack-
once we've started on this journey
there can be no turning back;
let us travel light, discarding
excess baggage from our past,

Synod Moderators report

cherish only what's essential,
choosing treasure that will last.

As we learn to appreciate what we have and from where we have come, we need to discern what we must now leave behind to enable forward movement. As a denomination, we are a small fraction of who and what we were in 1972 – we have about a fifth of the membership we had on our formation, and the number of churches has fallen from a little over 2,000 to a little under 1,300. We have about three-fifths the number of churches compared with one-fifth of the membership. These churches are served by 390 Ministers (Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary), compared to 1,844 in 1972. Again, the 'workforce' of Ministers of Word and Sacrament is about one-fifth of the number 50 years ago.

The days of one minister serving one church are gone forever – we simply don't have the ministers available or the finance to make it possible. So how shall we manage our limited ministerial resource? How should we best deploy and distribute our ministerial resources? All Synod Moderators and the relevant Synod committees are pouring countless hours into finding workable patterns for deployment, and we never lose sight of the fact that we are seeking to provide appropriate ministry for local churches: our planning and discussions are always in the context of local ministry needs. None of us is completely happy with the options we have so far identified – we would all love to be able to put more ministry into local churches, but that is simply not possible with the constraints within which we all operate. (The Moderators would also love to be free to do more to promote deepened discipleship and church growth rather than, seemingly, play this never-ending game of chess, moving pieces from one square to another but never 'winning'.)

Inevitably, we are drawn back to work that has been done several times before by General Assembly regarding the development of local leadership. The question the Moderators typically ask of a church facing ministerial vacancy, 'What do you need a Minister to do that only a Minister can do?' takes on renewed importance and greater urgency. What will make a difference to this local church? What are the charisms that a minister of Word and Sacraments might bring to this fellowship that would not be available otherwise? Perhaps of even greater importance is a different question: 'How shall we provide appropriate ministry and leadership for each congregation?' This must surely come not only from ministers of Word and Sacraments, but also, increasingly, from those called and ordained to the ministry of Elders, and from all members of the church. We do not, in theory, follow a priestly model of ministry when 'only the Minister counts' – we must be sure to follow a more Reformed practice, too. The old models simply do not work; we cannot stay where we are or rely on the way we used to do things.

As we freely acknowledge, much of this is not new thinking, but it really does seem the *Kairos* moment to finally take these questions seriously, own the fact that we are not what we once were or even what hoped we might become, but finally see that things must now be done differently.

Synod Moderators report

Our structures have been changed within our history, as our union grew and as we ended the role of the District Councils (except for very specific and occasional purposes). This is undoubtedly a point where we need to review and simplify our structures. We never meant to create a bureaucratic institution, yet many of us feel that we are too often bound up in red tape and unable to respond creatively to the new direction in which the Spirit of God is trying to blow us.

What are those things that are essential for us to carry forward, and what can we safely leave behind for the next phase of our journey?

What are those things that are essential for us to carry forwards and what can we safely leave behind for the next phase of our journey? What are the things that now leave us heavy laden and encumbered? A former General Secretary remarked that we are held back by two equally dangerous phrases: 'We've never done it like that before,' and 'We've always done it this way.' Can our Jubilee be one where we consign those sentiments to the past, while taking forward the positive aspects of our past that will help us for our next 50 years as this part of Christ's Body? We are not called to iconoclasm, destroying what has been important and helpful in the past simply because it is part of our inheritance, but neither can we possibly carry forward everything we have valued – we must retain what we need, but no more.

Courage, not comfort

When we set up camp and settle
to avoid love's risk and pain,
you disturb complacent comfort,
pull the tent pegs up again;
keep us travelling in the knowledge
you are always at our side;
give us courage for the journey,
Christ our goal and Christ our guide.

Joy Dine © Joy Dine

In our anniversary year, are we ready to ask God to pull up our tent pegs to prevent us stopping where we shouldn't? It has been said that Jesus came to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. We experience both comfort and disturbance in our lives, and sometimes rely too heavily on the familiar as a place of refuge or hiding, rather than turning to our God who will shelter under God's wings and dwell within God's tent, not ours (Psalm 61). After a bruising, even brutal, couple of years, we need comfort, but we must find that in God, not elsewhere.

Are we ready to ask God to pull up our tent pegs to prevent us stopping where we shouldn't?

Synod Moderators report

Taking risks

We are convinced that the denomination now needs to take risks. We don't have the resources, particularly the most valuable ones – people – to do all that we once did or that we would like to do. We are being forced, or at least very firmly guided, into looking at how we can and how we should do things differently, to suit a new age and new circumstances.

General Assembly has recognised this in commissioning the Church Life Review. The Synod Moderators are perhaps better placed than anyone else to see this need lived out in the life of a variety of local churches, needs that are deep and real.

Some churches have struggled more than others, and many have reached the conclusion that their particular fellowship has reached the end of its life and witness. We give thanks to God for all that has been achieved in Christ's name through the faithful service in these places.

In many places, by God's grace, we have been able to show the most remarkable resilience.
Thank you.

Others, by God's grace, have been able to show the most remarkable resilience, not only through the pandemic but through coping with changing patterns of ministry, decreased income and increased expenses, and (we might argue most importantly) with an ageing and declining membership. We have been heartened beyond measure as we have seen so many ministers, elders and members step up in sacrificial service of church and community, especially in these months and years of Covid-19. In the face of increasing challenge, the Church has done what she must, and responded wonderfully. It has not been easy for anyone, but to all who have gone the extra mile in pastoral care, providing worship online, meeting local needs to alleviate loneliness and poverty and generally to be Christ in your neighbourhoods – we see you, and God sees you.
Thank you.

Covid-19 is likely to be with us always, and continue to mutate and produce new variants, but we hope and trust that we have now travelled through the worst of this pandemic. So how shall we live in this time and in the years to come?

Again, we don't want to dishonour and disregard all that has brought us to this place and made us who we are. Yet is undoubtedly true that we can no longer do things, 'the way we've always done them'.

How shall we identify the risks we need to and are willing to take? At one Moderators' Meeting, we spent some time considering 1 Peter 3:13-18 (NRSV):

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer

Synod Moderators report

for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

Walking ever closer with Christ as Lord, we can know that doing the right thing because it is the right thing, will always be right, even if it might prove costly to us. Yet, who will harm us if we are eager to do good, and even if we do suffer, God will bless us.

As Abram was called to leave the familiar and travel into an unknown land, as Moses led the people out to slavery in the Exodus, and the first disciples gave up their familiar living in order to follow Christ, we can know that we do this at God's call.

In our Jubilee year, we remember also how our predecessors lost their living in parish churches for the sake of dissent – and in order to follow the path onto which God had called them. Our traditions have their roots in a travelling people, leaving behind the familiar in order to respond to the call to move on with God.

In the wilderness, the people grumbled and wanted to go back to how things were – even though that would mean returning to slavery.

We would rather listen to the prophet Isaiah's words, which we appropriate and adapt for the United Reformed Church:

See, God is about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Do not fear, for God has redeemed us; God has called us by name and will be with us as we pass through the waters, where even mighty rivers will not overwhelm us. We are precious in God's sight, and honoured and loved by God. Are we ready to venture with God into the unknown and embrace this new life?
(Based on verses from Isaiah 43.)

Now that the Covid-19 restrictions have all but ended (at the time of writing), we find ourselves with an opportunity ahead. When the Moderators offered 'Ready for the New Normal' to the United Reformed Church two years ago, we were signalling that the pandemic gave us all a chance to imagine things differently. Some have been able, despite the anxiety and uncertainty, to re-order life locally and fit themselves for a new age of being and doing. We see other churches that have yet to catch up, and sadly too many congregations that have reached the end of the road for the worship and witness, and have taken the, usually painful, decision to close. We pray for the whole United Reformed Church, that together and in our own fellowships we may discern the mind of Christ on how to move forwards.

We do not believe in a 'one-size-fits-all' solution, but according to local context, some of the answers will involve choosing to adopt locally-recognised 'lay leadership' rather than an ordained Minister, more creative collaboration between congregations, merging some churches and ceasing operation in other places. Alongside this we commend experiments to plant new causes through Fresh Expressions of church and pioneering ministry, and, true to our DNA, ecumenical co-operation wherever possible.

We do not believe one approach will suit everyone or fix every approach. But we do believe that there is hope for the United Reformed Church and for the world.

Synod Moderators report

Personalia

Despite all the challenges and changes of this season, the Moderators' Meeting remains united, and it is a pleasure and privilege to work together in the service of the Church. Since the General Assembly, we have been delighted to welcome Geoff Felton and Lythan Nevard among our number, serving Mersey and Eastern Synods respectively. We also record our continuing thanks to the Revd Ron Reid who has so helpfully minuted our meetings, but has indicated that he wishes to relinquish this responsibility at the end of this year, and to those who have taken on additional responsibility in various Synods during periods of moderatorial vacancy, especially those who have so ably represented their Synods at our monthly meetings – Richard Bradley, Paul Ellis, and Tim Meadows.

Discussion questions

1. What are you most excited about in this report? What concerns you most?
2. If you could make one change to your local church, what would it be?
3. How will you raise that idea in your church and how can you take action to bring it about?