

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	For information and discussion.
Draft resolution(s)	N/A

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To update Assembly Executive of work in progress and response to the consultation on structures.
Main points	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. An overview of work in hand2. An overview of responses to the structures consultation3. Initial reflections on the structures consultation.
Previous relevant documents	General Assembly N1 2022 Assembly Executive N2 2021.
Consultation has taken place with...	GA Committees, Synod Moderators and Clerks.

Summary of impact

Financial	N/A
External (eg ecumenical)	N/A

Part one

Updates from task groups

1. Theos research

This work is being undertaken by Dr Nathan Lladin, Senior Researcher with Theos. His visits to the selected congregations are on track and interviews have been set up. It is anticipated that data from this piece of work will be available in

February 2023. Theos have also expressed interest and requested sight of the responses to the Jubilee questions which have been circulated (see point 4 below). A related issue of what additional data it may be possible to obtain through the church annual return is being explored.

2. Forensic accounting with MKS

Most of the financial material has now been received from Synods. Melanie Campbell is continuing to work with Synods where there are gaps in information to try to address any outstanding issues. There will be a meeting with MKS in mid October to review progress and it is hoped that a clearer timetable for completion of this work will be available following this.

3. Theology of money

Initial conversations have taken place concerning resources which will enable reflection on a theology of money, and how we are called to use money within the denomination. We are seeking to invite a number of people to contribute to this resource from biblical, financial, and justice perspectives. The aim is that this work shall be available for General Assembly 2023 and provide a theological grounding for a number of pieces of work currently being undertaken as part of the Church Life Review, including the forensic accounting and some of the governance questions.

4. Tending the Vineyard Service for Reformation Sunday, 30 October 2022

The material for this service was made available through Worship Notes, the Daily Devotions Sunday service, and publicised on social media, in Reform and through the Tending the Vineyard postcards. Responses are requested by 28 November and will be collated as soon as practical thereafter.

5. Minimum requirements for being a congregation

A redraft of this work is underway.

Future work

6. Consultation with the Synod Moderators

The Church Life Review Group will be holding a 48 hour consultation with the Synod Moderators from 5 to 7 December. This will be facilitated by the Moderator of General Assembly, the Revd Fiona Bennett. Fiona has spent time with both the CLRG and Moderators, reflecting on aims of the consultation and has designed a process for the consultation accordingly.

7. Communication strategy

Following discussion with Andy Jackson, it is intended to use Facebook as a way of sharing the work of the Church Life Review Group more widely. In addition to posting information, the Facebook Live function would also allow for real-time interaction and events with those who would like to engage further with the Review. Andy has offered support from the Communications Team, wherever possible.

- Detailed planning is still to take place for the consultation event with representatives of Synods, LPAG and others on governance and financial questions. The timing of this event is determined in part by when the results of the forensic accounting exercise are known.

Part two

Consultation process on Paper N2/Resolution 27 from General Assembly 2022 on General Assembly Structures

Introduction

This is an interim report which provides Assembly Executive with feedback from the consultation process on Paper N2/Resolution 27 passed at General Assembly, concerning the proposed committee structure for the denomination. It goes on to offer some initial reflections about the proposed structure in light of the feedback received. The Church Life Review Group (CLRG) next meets after the deadline for the production of reports for Assembly Executive and so will consider the responses from the consultation process fully at its next meeting. It is anticipated that a further document for consultation will come to Committees, Moderators, Clerks and others following the CLRG consultation with Synod Moderators in early December, before a final paper is prepared for General Assembly 2023.

Consultation on Resolution 27

Section one: Review of responses received

The Church Life Review Group (CLRG) is grateful to all committees, their Conveners and Secretaries for their willingness to discuss Paper N2 and offer their responses to it within a very tight timescale. The CLRG is aware of the deficiencies of the consultation process, apologises and seeks to learn from this experience as the work of the CLRG progresses. In particular, it acknowledges that asking committees to comment on a paper already passed at General Assembly may have given the impression that decisions had already been taken and seeks to assure Committees and Assembly Executive that this is not the case and that there will be opportunity for further consultation, as indicated above.

Responses were received from eleven committees or their Conveners. The Synod Moderators held a discussion and decided to respond individually and four responded, two Synod Clerks responded and one Synod sent a response from their Synod Leadership team. Some committees confined their discussion to their own particular remit, other responses considered the paper as a whole.

There was a high level of agreement that change was necessary within the present Committee structure and that a smaller structure is desirable with a variety of views on process, the overarching structure proposed and questions about detail and practicalities.

Some respondents felt that insufficient attention had been given to vision, aspiration and strategy of both the denomination as a whole, and individual committee work, and that strategy should shape structure. It was felt that to adopt a new structure without clarity of vision and strategy was a mistake and lost opportunity. Other respondents asked whether the proposed restructuring is largely about numbers of volunteers and cost and would like to know whether any work been done on the reduction in terms of people and cost on the new committees?

The proposal to create three main areas of work was welcomed by some and felt to be logical with Mission having an outwards focus, Church Life an inward focus and Administration and Resources supporting both to work well. However, there were many concerns raised about the size of the proposed committees, wider remits, the challenges of grappling with the level of detail required and the potential necessity of working with more sub-groups or reassurance that sub-groups would continue. Concerns were also expressed about staff capacity and workload and the range and depth of experience required of committee members. There was feeling expressed that in recent years there had been much more 'joined up' work between committees and staff and this was developing rather than diminishing within the denomination. A desire was expressed that the voices of children and young people in particular be clearly heard in any new structure.

Paper N2 proposes that a number of committees cease to exist and a number of respondents commented on these in particular. Comments concerning Faith and Order indicated a strong desire for a continuing and respected place for Faith and Order, given our commitment to ecumenism. Any new body should be able to bring matters to the denomination for consideration as well as respond to issues from within the denomination and ecumenical partners.

The proposal to disband the Business Committee was felt to see the Business Committee as only an Assembly Arrangements Committee and to lose the element of helping to support Officers, and to shape and manage meetings, and to enable difficult items of business. To take that away from an appointed committee and give it to a less accountable group of individuals was felt to be unwise and unhelpful. This is an area where further thinking has been carried out and a revision to the proposal is in section two of this report.

Much of the debate at General Assembly centred around the proposal to disband the Equalities Committee, with many contributors feeling that if Equalities became everyone's responsibility it would in fact become no-one's responsibility. It was also felt that in a smaller structure with a reduced number of committees and groups, some marginalised voices would be lost all together. There was a broad consensus that some form of identifiable group with the sole remit of resourcing and upholding the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion within the church was required, increasingly in local congregational settings as well as at a denominational level. The CLRG is grateful to Philip Brooks for his work in progressing this conversation, and further thinking is outlined in section two of this report.

A number of omissions were noted by respondents, notably the lack of mention of the Assessment Board, and the Resource Sharing Task Group as parts of the structure and a lack of mention of discipleship as part of the broader questions concerning vision and strategy.

Reflections from a number of individuals and committees raised very practical questions such as remits and recruitment for committee members, transition from one system to another and the nominations process. The CLRG is grateful for these types of question and acknowledges that further work will require to be done to ensure the transition to any new structure is as smooth and informed as possible.

Paper N2 considered the committee structure of the General Assembly, amongst the respondents there were also calls for the review of structures to move through other councils and structures of the denomination to include subcommittees and advisory groups of General Assembly committees and Synods and Synod Trustees. There was a call for the denomination to have confidence in employed staff to make decisions and get on with work given to them and for staff to have clearly delegated authority.

Section two: Reflections on the initial feedback

It is worth drawing the attention of the Assembly Executive to a key paragraph within our report in November 2021 (paper N2). That stated that:

“We don’t believe that the United Reformed Church as a whole can or should develop some kind of ‘mission strategy’. The forms of worship, witness, evangelism and service that are called for in any one context can only be successfully determined in that context. We believe we are better to concentrate on how the wider church best resources those front-lines of mission, rather than attempt to pre-determine what local churches should be doing.”

We believe this is very significant for our work in total, and that this is in line with the fundamental polity of the United Reformed Church. The vision and mission of the church is discerned primarily within the local church. The primary task of the wider church, including the work of the General Assembly, is to resource local churches and to assist Synods to resource local churches. There are elements of the mission of the Church that rightly belong themselves at General Assembly level (one thinks, for example, of the work of the Joint Public Issues Team which could not effectively be carried out by local churches or Synods alone), but the primary locus of mission is always the local. The General Assembly structure is therefore not designed to deliver a set of pre-determined strategic goals for the denomination, but to service local churches and Synods. Put simply, the structures of the General Assembly are about the purpose of us being the Church, the body of Christ, the people of God. We are unconvinced that the United Reformed Church is seeking an Assembly level mission strategy or programme that is then rolled out to local churches. It would not be helpful, therefore, to determine its committee structures around such an idea.

To attempt to outline the underlying principles of our thinking in bullet points, we might say that the aims of the revision of structures are:

- To enable the United Reformed Church to provide the infrastructure and resources that are necessary to support the work of local churches and Synods.
- To carry out at General Assembly level only those functions of the life of the church that are not more appropriately carried out at local or Synod level.

- To provide integrated decision making and delivery as much as is possible to avoid duplication or lack of coherence.
- To significantly reduce the number of people required to populate the committee structure to make it proportionate to the current size of the United Reformed Church.
- To ensure coherence between the Committee Structure and the Church House Staffing Structure to facilitate joined-up strategic thinking and operations.
- To ensure that committees work at the level of strategy, policy and governance, not engaging with operational decision making.

We hear the nervousness around bringing together a range of areas of church life within a Church Life committee. However, we continue to think that coherent oversight of all the various ministries of the life of the church, along with the education and training provided to enable and equip those ministries, will be most effectively delivered by one committee with oversight of this area of the Church's life. This also allows the committee to function in an intergenerational fashion. The experience of the Mission Committee is helpful in this regard, as they went on a similar journey of bringing together a range of work previously held by different committees. There is a sample agenda and reflection from Philip Brooks as Deputy General Secretary for Mission appended to this report. We hope that the next iteration of our proposals will include model agendas for the Church Life committee to help put flesh on the bones of the idea.

We also remain convinced that an Administration and Resources Committee (though there have been some suggestions as to other names, such as Finance and General Purposes) will help integrate key aspects of our work (and this seems broadly supported by committees in this area). It is, for example, 'odd', that we separate out key decisions about Human Resources matters (which constitute the greatest proportion of the Church House part of the budget) from overall responsibility for that budget. The proposals would enable these oddities to be resolved.

There is a clear question about how new committees might be composed. Currently, the Mission Committee has representatives of each Synod. This is good for enabling good two-way communication. It leads to quite a large committee, which can struggle to be strategic because of its size. It can be difficult to ensure diversity within the committee, because often Synods find it impossible to provide a choice of potential candidates to serve which might enable a more balanced committee. There are, for example, no youth representatives on the committee. There are a number of key questions about the composition of committees that need addressing, and we would welcome feedback from Assembly Executive about:

1. Should the three key committees (Administration and Resources, Mission and Church Life) all be made up in the same way or would them having different means of being appointed matter?
2. Do we have a preference for smaller, potentially more diverse committees, or committees with each Synod having a representative which may be less diverse and less focussed strategically?

An issue has been raised about whether there is capacity within existing staff roles to take on additional line management responsibilities in terms of the proposed 'Team Leaders'. This is a genuine concern and needs addressing. There is, though, a reality

that there is a need to ensure the number of staff at Church House does not expand disproportionately (recognising, however, that as in all areas of Church Life, many responsibilities are falling to staff that previously were held by volunteers, which creates a certain pressure to increase staffing levels at times). We will consider this further.

We would note that the Faith and Order Committee becoming a Reference Group would not change the reality that it is accountable to General Assembly and would bring business to Assembly. It is more about recognition that it is a specialist group, and one where business might normally reach it for its response, rather than it to generate new business.

The responses around the Business Committee are compelling. There was a sense in our deliberations that the 'Assembly Arrangements' function of the Business Committee had been uppermost in our minds (throughout the last few years of Covid-19, Assembly Arrangements has been its focus for obvious reasons). The aspect of its work which is about ensuring the coherence of business, that important strands of work are not lost, and that 'gaps' in the work of the Church are noticed is important. There may be a case for it to continue in a revised form that recognises this is its primarily function. For example, it could perhaps be formed of the Officers of the General Assembly and the Convenors of the Administration and Resources, Mission, and Church Life Committees (representing the committees that will generate most of the work of the Assembly).

We will continue to reflect carefully on the Equalities Committee and the question of how matters of equality, diversity and inclusion remain central to the life of the United Reformed Church. Philip Brooks, on behalf of the General Secretariat, has explored the issue carefully with a number of interested parties, and the committee itself has commented. Various matters for consideration have arisen:

- That the committee has struggled with a wide and increasingly technical brief from within the resources of the committee itself.
- That matters of diversity and inclusion are rapidly becoming a compliance issue that will need handling in appropriate ways in that context.
- That to engage meaningfully with the issues, dedicated staff time will be necessary.
- That where major pieces of work have emerged (becoming an anti-racist church, and on affirmative action), these have been the result of leadership from particular staff members.
- That equalities issues may be better handled by dedicated staff accountable to some kind of watchdog group within the life of the Church.

Appendix – A note on the functioning of the Mission Committee, and an example agenda

Mission Committee

A glance at the most recent agenda of Mission Committee and the headline panel reminds the reader of the wide-ranging nature of the remit. This is a forum which brings together so many different strands in the life of the denomination: Church and Society

and its work with the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT); Global Intercultural Ministries with its emphasis on world church relationships and racial justice; ecumenical and interfaith relations; Commitment for Life; fresh expressions and pioneering; environmental work; oversight of the URC presence at Greenbelt; evangelism and mission; rural networks. All of this is underpinned by the principle that each Synod sends a representative. The Synod involvement is vital as representatives play their part in shaping the URC's mission agenda and then disseminate information back to local churches. This is the work of the whole Church.

We take for granted now that all of the above comes to one committee, but that was not always the case. Mission Committee is an amalgam of what were once several separate committees, each overseeing their individual areas. It took time and a fair degree of angst in combining all of this work into one body. It has resulted in wide ranging agendas, but there is a strength in sharing everything which is being undertaken in mission as a team. So much so, that this approach has now been widened by inviting discipleship colleagues to attend as observers, to identify the areas where there is overlap. The alternative to this holistic approach would be a return to working in silos and potentially duplicating work.

Yes, there are some challenges. It is not always easy for Synods to recruit Mission Committee representatives, even though those who are appointed find the roles fulfilling and energising. It is also somewhat less onerous now we meet online for two of our three 'residential' meetings. The role of the convenor is central in focusing the work and Mission Committee has been well served in this respect.

That it works can be evidenced in the contribution of Mission Committee to the 2022 General Assembly. Resolutions were brought which challenged the denomination in its commitment to the environment; racial justice – including the legacies of slavery apology and becoming an anti-racist church; social justice; global and ecumenical relationships. The efforts of our forebears in working through the difficulties of bringing together several smaller and more disparate committees are bearing fruit.

Philip Brooks – October 2022

Mission Committee, 22 – 23 September 2022 Focolare Centre, Welwyn Garden City

Agenda

Remit of the Mission Committee:

The central task of the Mission Committee is to focus on mission, working with the whole of the Church to formulate and give expression to our mission and faith in ways which bring alive our vision of 'being Christ's people, transformed by the Gospel, making a difference to the world' (General Assembly 2007). The committee seeks to encourage growth in discipleship, evangelism and witness by:

- * reflecting on the church's mission practice and theology
- * formulating policy, strategies and programme (action) priorities
- * reading the signs of the times and speaking prophetically
- * working with partners
- * continuously evaluating the place of mission and evangelism within the work of General Assembly.

Thursday 22 September 2022

11.30: **Induction session** for new members and those who wish to attend

2.00pm: **Session 1**

- Opening worship – Sarah Lane Cawte, Convenor of Mission Committee
- Introductions and apologies
- Notification of Synod items
- Presentation 'Open Table' – Alex Clare-Young
- Follow-up on Resolution 7 General Assembly – 'Towards an anti-racist church'.

3.30pm: **Coffee break**

4.00pm: **Session 2 (Global and Intercultural Ministries/Commitment for Life)**

- Staff reports
- Follow-up on GA Resolutions 18, 20 and 21
- Environmental policy and BWC grants
- Revolting Christians 2.0 – planned environmental conference at Westminster College with the Reformed and Lutheran Church of Argentina
- CWM Conference – South Africa.

5.30pm: **Session 3**

- Fresh Expressions/Newbigin Hub launch update
- Greenbelt report
- World Council of Churches Assembly attended by Philip Brooks and Karen Campbell
- 50th Celebrations update

6.30pm: **Dinner**

8.00pm: **Session 4 (Ecumenical and Interfaith)**

- Follow-up to GA Resolution 16 – Reinvigorating the URC's ecumenical vision
- Report from ecumenical officers' conference
- Interfaith update – new URC resource on Holy Land pilgrimage

9.00pm: **Evening prayers** – Aftab Mughal (N W Synod rep)

Friday 23 September 2022

7.45 – 8.45: **Breakfast**

9.00: **Session 5 (Evangelism and Mission)**

- Morning worship – Lindsey Brown (Eastern Synod rep)
- Evangelism and Mission Discussion (contributions from Stuart Nixon on behalf of Mersey Synod and Philip Brooks – Steve Summers and Sam Richards invited observers from the Discipleship Team)
- Mission Enabling Fund launch and awareness

10.30: **Coffee Break**

11.00: **Session 6 (general business)**

- Warm Hubs initiative – NW Synod, Aftab Mughal
- Church and Society/JPIT Report and Update
- Application from Elim Church to join Free Churches Group
- Mission Committee Convenor second term from 2024
- Commitment for Life Convenor second term
- Mission Committee representative to the Ecumenical Reference Group
- Minutes of last meeting and matters arising (MINUTES)
- Items from Synods
- Dates and venues for future meetings in 2023 – for notification
2/3 Feb (online), 8/9 June (online), 28/29 September (Luther King House)

12.45: **Closing prayers** – Sarah Lane Cawte

1.00pm: **Lunch and departures**