

Faith – Hope – Love – Since 1972

**daily**   
**devotions**  
from the United Reformed Church

*Reflecting on our Jubilee*  
A Small Group Study Series

## ***An Overview***

The URC celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in October 2022. To mark this various writers have contributed to a series of readings, reflections, and prayers which will be distributed through the Daily Devotions email list every morning over the first two weeks of October. Some of these reflections have been used to provide four small group study sessions which will encourage us to reflect, give thanks, and rise to the challenge of being part of the URC in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Each session involves hymns from a variety of URC writers to help us reflect.

We look at a number of ideas:

- In session 1 Susan Durber, Darnette Whitby Reid and Andy Braunston ponder music and inclusion.
- In the second session we are helped to reflect on our call to ecumenism by Lindsey Sanderson, James Breslin and David Thompson.
- Kirsty Thorpe, John Ellis and Fleur Houston help us reflect on some of the challenges in our church life in our third session, whilst
- David Cornick, John Bradbury and Fiona Bennett offer thoughts on ordinary saints dealing with the ongoing work of being reformed in the final session.

We hope this resource will be a useful tool to help bring people together to reflect on our life and ministry – giving thanks for our history and all that is good whilst, at the same time, facing up to the challenges ahead.

## *How to Use This Resource*

This resource is designed to be used in a variety of ways. It could be the basis for a congregational day together – either at church, a local hotel or retreat centre, or in someone's home - with two sessions in the morning and two in the afternoon. It could be used over a series of four weeks as a mid-week study group either in person or via Zoom. It could be used as an activity across a pastorate of several congregations or used in just one congregation. We've made it as flexible as possible and anticipate each session will take around 90 minutes.

You will need....



A leader who will have to have read the material beforehand and be prepared to lead discussion. This person might ask others to read the Biblical passages and reflections but should be prepared to ask the questions and encourage the quiet, and quieten the over enthusiastic, so that everyone gets a chance to speak.

A host to work out refreshments if at church or in someone's home.

A techie to look after the technology if offering this via Zoom.

A musician, or good singer, to lead the singing. If that is too much of a tall order simply read through the words of the hymns treating them as poems. We also have the songs available to download as MP3s which could be useful as either backing tracks or simply to listen to.

**This** leader's resource **and** copies of the members' resource for each week

<i>When You See This Logo</i>	<i>This happens</i>
	There's some text to read
	There's a hymn to sing or look at <i>You'll need a copyright licence to reproduce the words unless otherwise stated – or use Rejoice and Sing.</i>
	There's a Biblical Reading to read and think about
	There's some questions to answer
	We pray

## Session 1 Sing A New Church Into Being



We start this session by looking at URC minister and hymn writer, Fred Kaan's hymn *Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ*. You may wish to sing it - or you may wish to read it together and enjoy the poetry and ideas in it.

**Hymn**      *Let Us Talents And Tongues Employ*  
The Rev'd Fred Kaan (1929-2009) Rejoice and Sing 453



Let us talents and tongues employ,  
reaching out with a shout of joy:  
bread is broken, the wine is poured,  
Christ is spoken & seen & heard.

2: Christ is able to make us one,  
at his table he set the tone,  
teaching people to live to bless,  
love in word and in deed express.

*Jesus lives again,  
earth can breathe again,  
pass the Word around:  
loaves abound!*

3: Jesus calls us in, sends us out  
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,  
gives us love to tell, bread to share:  
God (Immanuel) everywhere!

### Introduction



Singing is a vital part of any church's worship. The earliest Christians continued the practice of the Synagogue in singing the Psalms and seemed to add other spiritual songs to their repertoire. By the time of the Reformation singing was something professional choirs did in parish churches or something that monastic communities did in their round of daily services - but not something that ordinary Christians routinely did. At the Reformation Luther encouraged a wave of hymn writing and singing, whereas those who followed Calvin preferred to sing only the Psalms or paraphrases of Scripture – however, each tradition led to a renewal of singing for ordinary Christians. In our own age we love to sing – the poetry of the hymn coupled with the power of the music can evoke worship and action.

### Question



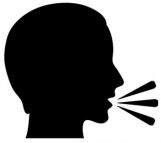
- If you were asked to name a favourite hymn, what would it be and why?

**Reading**    *Psalm 96: 1-6*



O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.  
Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.  
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples.  
For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.  
For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.  
Honour and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

## Reflection



The URC has produced some wonderful, innovative and skilful hymn writers over our life as the Rev'd Dr Susan Durber writes:

*I was once at a dinner party with some gorgeous people, who were also very traditional Anglicans. On hearing that I was a member of the United Reformed Church, one, actually rather famous, member of the company, asked, 'Oh, do you have hymns in your church?' I think I mentioned Isaac Watts...*

*And I reflected, in calmer mode, that perhaps we are sometimes as guilty as others of ignorance of our own tradition, or lack of appreciation for it.*

*We stand, in the URC, in a wonderful tradition of innovative hymn writing and it's no accident that we have had, and still have among us, some of the finest of modern hymn writers. The Reformers took us back to singing the Psalms (and some of those Genevan Psalm settings have a simplicity of form that is deeply moving - when I sing them in the cathedral in Geneva the tears come). Then others, in our own land, found they wanted words to sing in praise of God that included the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ.*

*Isaac Watts wrote countless hymns, but if he had only written 'When I survey the wondrous cross' he would be worthy of our thanks. Those words, as full of complexity and allusion as a Jane Austen novel, are skilful and beautiful enough to take any singer's breath away.*

*In later times Fred Kaan, after a world war, wrote hymns for a modern era when faith was challenged to find new words. In the best of our worship we know how to sing hymns that don't merely punctuate the liturgy, but are part of it. We have among us those who give the time to the preparation of worship that is timely, beautiful, well crafted, rooted in the traditions of faith and speaking into the present moment. Let us thank God for this gift that we hold, let's nurture it faithfully for the Church of the future, and let no-one keep us from singing.*



## Question

- What do you like in a hymn?  
(is it the tune or the words or the pairing of the two?)

## Prayer



Thank you God for the gift of song,  
for the wonder of hymns  
crafted in beauty and strength,  
set to music that lifts words,  
and that touches our spirits.  
Give us voices with which to sing,  
men and women with skill in composition,  
and the fellowship of the heavenly choir,  
to sing your eternal praise, Amen.



Hymns speak of many things – our view of God, Jesus’ message, our responsibilities as Christians, to name a few. Most of all, however, hymns can reflect the values we have. The Rev’d Dr Jan Berry’s *Hymn of Jubilee* does this rather well.

**Hymn of Jubilee** (for the United Reformed Church)

© Jan Berry Tune: *Charterhouse R&S 33 or Lord of the Years R&S 603*



We celebrate the call  
that’s shaped our story,  
the joys and struggles  
since we first begun;  
we are your people,  
reaching for your glory  
until the day  
when all shall be as one.

3: We long to see  
all people in your image,  
sharing the world,  
the riches that you give;  
but pride and greed can  
overwhelm the message  
spoil the life  
you meant us all to live.

2: We welcome all  
to gather at Christ’s table,  
our wounds and sorrows  
made whole in your grace;  
inviting all, regardless of the labels  
defining us  
by status, creed, or race.

4: As buildings fail,  
and worshippers grow older,  
we wonder whether  
witness can survive.  
We struggle on,  
with passion growing colder,  
yet hope persists, still keeping faith alive.

5: Let Jubilee become a shout of mission,  
as those who’ve been downtrodden find a voice.  
We’re reaching out with joy to catch the vision  
that makes our hearts sing out with praise: “Rejoice!”



Darnette Whitby Reid reflects on this yearning to welcome all to Christ’s table but first we read from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

**Hebrews 13: 7 - 8**



Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them.

**Reflection**



Darnette writes:

*Our congregation in Tottenham, London, is largely made up of people from the Windrush generation, their children, and grandchildren. Our URC has made this first generation welcome, and they have been able to find a home there. They have embedded themselves in the life and mission of the church. The church has continued to struggle and speak out against issues of local and global injustice. We have sought to make everyone feel welcome and that they can bring and contribute their gifts and skills to the round table.*

Children and young people were an integral part of ministry. In 1990 I became an elder at age 22 and have been encouraged and supported to be a part of church life regionally and nationally. This ethos is true not only in my local church but for the wider church. As a young person I attended 'CONNECT' and FURY. I remember FURY leading the way in the URC boycotting Nestlé products over an unethical practice. This was profound. The URC was instrumental in one of the first joint initiatives with CWM 'Training in Mission' that was exclusively for young people.

I cannot reflect on my local church without mentioning our church's annual week-long youth adventure to Devon. I attended as a young person, then as a Leader, where I was challenged both physically and spiritually. When I became a mum, I took a break, but the pull was as strong as ever. I eventually returned with my young son in tow. Years later, my son went as a teenager and I was humbled and filled with pride when he went as a young leader. Two generations. Praise God.

Wider afield, the URC has become more welcoming of **all** people regardless of age, sexuality, race, and education. It has received its first black Youth Assembly moderator. Let us continue to be reformed and reforming.



### Questions

- What are the ways in which your congregation welcomes different types of people?
- What else could your congregation do?

### Prayer



Loving God, thank you for being there with us over the years, when we struggle to be of one mind, a conciliar church.

Forgiving God, we are sorry for the times we have been our selfish, for the times we put our interest before what we know to be true and correct.

Life sustaining God, continue give us the passion for humanity, as we continue to act impartially, with kindness while we walk with you. Amen



Basil Bridge's hymn *O God, Your Love's Undying Flame*, urges us to burn with the fire of God's love – a love that bids us welcome

### Hymn

*O God, Your Love's Undying Flame*

The Rev'd Basil E. Bridge (b 1927) Tune: Sussex Carol, R&S 327



O God, your love's undying flame  
was seen in desert bush ablaze,  
when Moses learned  
your secret name  
the Lord of past and future days;  
Lord, we would learn  
what you require  
and burn for you with living fire.

2: O Lord of fire,  
your love a flame  
that longed to set the earth ablaze:  
to bring the Kingdom's joy you came  
and freed us,  
trapped in earth-bound ways;  
Lord, we would share your love's desire,  
and burn for you with living fire.

3: O Holy Spirit, tongues of flame that set the new-born Church ablaze;  
to each believer then you came, and lives were filled with power and praise;  
O Spirit, come, our lives inspire to burn for you with living fire.



The Rev'd Andy Braunston reflects on his own journey into the URC using the following passage from Isaiah as a starting place.

**Reading:** *Isaiah 56: 1 - 8*



This is what the Lord says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. Blessed is the one who does this - the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps their hands from doing any evil." Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." For this is what the Lord says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant - these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." The Sovereign Lord declares - he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."



### Reflection

Andy writes:

*Growing up a Catholic, I was attracted to the post Vatican II image of the Church as a pilgrim people. My own journey of faith has been something of a pilgrimage - coming to a lively faith within Catholicism, spending some of my formative years in a charismatic evangelical Anglican congregation, and then, after coming out as gay man, spending many years as a member, and then minister, of an LGBT based denomination, before finally arriving in the URC about 10 years ago. At each stage of my journey I've felt God call me forward, despite some of the movement being very difficult and causing pain to some of those dear to me.*

*What attracted me to the URC wasn't so much the openness to sexual and gender minorities as the sense of being provisional - this is what we believe, but we know that, in God's good time, new truth from the Word may shine forth. This idea of being ready to change, ready to embrace all that God sends, is echoed in our passage from Isaiah - good news for those who felt themselves excluded from the Jewish people. Eunuchs and foreigners are promised a memorial better than descendants - a place in God's own house - a house of prayer for all people.*

*In our efforts to include, carefully discern, and follow where God calls us, I believe we are trying to embody much of what the writer of today's passage had in mind - this call to be both faithful and inclusive. Of course the theory is more attractive than the reality - careful discernment can be incredibly frustrating, ensuring good order can be infuriating, hearing views different to our own can be very irritating. When I get frustrated I remember the words attributed to the proto-reformer Erasmus - whose evangelical friends kept urging him to leave the Catholic Church - "I put up with much in the Church as it puts up with much in me."*



### Questions

- Is the fact that we are provisional in our views – always being open to what God



has in store for us next – a source of joy or frustration for you?



- The URC is a church which has, by design, decided it has a variety of views on a number of issues – back in the 1980s when the Churches of Christ joined, for example, we decided to honour and celebrate two different baptismal polices – either to baptise infants or to dedicate them and let them decide, as adults, if they wished to make a public faith commitment. In recent years we've decided we don't have a common position on same sex marriage, with those churches who wish to offer this being able to whilst no church has to. What do you think about this diversity?

## **Prayer**

Holy God,  
You call us to be faithful and provisional;  
to hold fast to what we know to be true,  
yet willing to follow where You call.  
Help us to be true pilgrims,  
unafraid to follow,  
faithful and fruitful,  
incisive and inclusive,  
that we may be a house of prayer  
for all people. Amen.

We conclude this session with a moment's quiet to reflect on all that we've heard and shared.

## **Hymn Writers**

*The Rev'd Fred Kaan* was a Congregationalist and, subsequently URC, minister serving in Plymouth, Geneva with the International Congregational Council, the Council for World Mission, and then as Moderator of the West Midlands Synod before his final ministry in an LEP in Swindon. He was a prolific hymn writer.

*The Rev'd Dr Jan Berry* is a retired URC minister who served, first in the Baptist Union, and then in the URC in and around Manchester before teaching at Northern College.

*The Rev'd Basil Bridge* was ordained to Congregational ministry in 1951 serving at Knowle in Warwickshire, Leicester (becoming part of the URC), Samford and Bourne in Lincolnshire, and Harrold in Bedfordshire. He wrote around 30 hymns and contributed tunes to 7 of them.

## **Contributors**

*The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber* is the Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

*Darnette Whitby Reid* is a serving Elder at High Cross URC in Tottenham

*The Rev'd Andy Braunston* is the Minister for Digital Worship and a member of the Peedie Kirk URC in Kirkwall, Orkney.

## Session 2 The Quest for Unity



We start this session with a hymn from URC minister, The Rev'd Sue McCoan written for an ordination service.

**Hymn**      Your Love Alone Turns Action into Service  
© The Rev'd Sue McCoan Tune Finlandia



Your love alone turns action into service,  
Your grace alone turns speaking into prayer.  
All that we are is held within your mercy,  
all that we do, made holy in your care.  
Spirit of God, breathe through us in our worship,  
take and transform the gifts and griefs we bear.

2: Bind with your truth this act of dedication;  
confirm with hope each step of faith we take;  
disturb with joy our cautious hesitation  
renew with strength the promises we make.  
Spirit of God, pour out your affirmation,  
bless us for life, made sacred for your sake.

### Introduction



Sue McCoan's assertion that it is only God's love that turns our actions into loving service is a good starting place as we think of the URC's desire to seek unity in Christ's Church – a desire that grew throughout the twentieth century. The formation of united churches on the Indian subcontinent, in particular, led to a desire to emulate that move towards union in the UK. This resulted in long lasting talks between the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Union of England and Wales (observed by the Churches of Christ) and led to the formation of the URC in 1972. The Rev'd Professor David Thompson was an observer at those talks and reflects on the URC as an ecumenical pioneer, but first we read from Ephesians.

### Ephesians 4: 1-6



I entreat you, then I, a prisoner for the Lord's sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling. Be humble always and gentle, and patient too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives. There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope held in God's call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But each of us has been given his gift, his due portion of Christ's bounty.

*(New English Bible)*

### Reflection

David writes:



*These were the opening words of the New Testament lesson of the Thanksgiving Service for the inauguration of the United Reformed Church in Westminster Abbey on 5 October 1972. They are taken from the New English Bible's translation, which was still the most recent translation at that time. Thus there is no inclusive language, as there might be today.*

*I want to concentrate on the first and last verses above. The United Reformed Church*

*has a calling to be an ecumenical pioneer. So far as it can, it has been. But this is not only a calling for the Church together; each one of us has a gift which we need to fulfil. This is where more self-examination is required. What do we think that the gift for the Church's unity is that each of us has?*

*It might be writing minutes, or careful accounts of meetings; it might be playing the organ, or piano, or guitar or drums at some joint act of worship with neighbouring churches. It might simply be making coffee after a prayer group meeting. We need to say what we think our gift might be, rather than leaving someone else to guess or suggest it – the very act of suggesting it may lead others to think of doing something they had not previously thought of. It also shows that we are willing to offer our gift.*

*Nor is it easy. In the heated debate of General Assembly or Church Meeting, it is very easy to forget to 'be forbearing with one another and charitable'. Here the Moderator, or minister, or Moderator's Chaplain has a valuable part to play, watching out for the right moment to ask everyone to be quiet and to pray for 'the bonds of peace'*

## Questions



- Is the search for Christian unity still something which energises us?
- What does your congregation do to reflect our desire for unity with other Christians?
- What gifts and skills do you have which might help in that ministry?

## Prayer

We use now a prayer of confession and repentance from the Westminster Abbey service marking our formation.



O God eternal,  
with whom alone there is healing for our divisions;  
we confess and repent of all in our past disunity  
which sprang from pride and not from love of truth;  
all uncharitable thoughts, words and deeds  
which have hindered thy healing work;  
all individual failings and sins which have added to confusion  
and broken the peace of thy Church.  
Have mercy upon us, we pray thee;  
cover all our sins by thy forgiveness,  
and renew our life in thy love;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



URC minister The Rev'd Colin Thompson has written the following hymn to mark our jubilee where we give thanks for those who have gone before us and reflect on our call to unite.



### Hymn God of the Pilgrim Way

© The Rev'd Colin Thompson. Tune: Colin suggests the German Chorale *Darmstadt* by Ahasuerus Fritsch (1629-1701) which can be heard on the URC website here <https://urc.org.uk/who-we-are/our-50th-anniversary/urc-at-50-worship-resources-competition/> but it also works well to Nun Danket "Now Thank We All Our God" which is better known.

1 God of the pilgrim way,  
guide of each generation,  
through ever-changing years  
our sure and firm foundation:  
we turn to you, the source  
of all that's good and true,  
the never-failing store  
of treasures old and new.

2 We praise you for the lives  
of those who went before us,  
saints honoured, saints unsung,  
the witness which they bore us;  
for those who took to heart  
the prayer of Christ the Son,  
that all who bear his name  
should be in Christ as one:

3 One Church, a house of peace,  
where people long surrounded  
by walls built to divide  
meet, held in Love unbounded.  
The suffering of our world,  
the sorrows of our earth  
cry for your healing touch,  
long for a second birth.

4 And when the way grows hard,  
and will and purpose fail us,  
when dreams and visions die,  
and doubts and fears assail us,  
let wisdom from on high  
our troubled spirits raise,  
walk with us on the road  
and set our hearts ablaze.

5 United for your sake, by grace a new creation,  
grant us the strength to serve the work of your salvation:  
hope for a world unsoiled by terror, lies and greed,  
faith in a future blest where Love's commandments lead.



David Thompson observed the negotiations which led to our first union, whereas Lindsey Sanderson was a minister in the Congregational Union of Scotland, which became part of the URC in 2000. She reflects on our quest for unity in both a church and wider context starting with a reading from Isaiah and a passage from the sermon preached at the 2000 union.

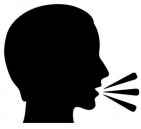
### Isaiah 11.6

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.



'Unity in Christ is not achieved by keeping quiet but by engaging in a difficult and complex costly argument; it is not achieved by pouring oil on troubled waters but by dealing with the trouble; it is not achieved by leaving Jerusalem for the quiet hills of Galilee but by riding into the city and cleansing the temple. Confrontation must be the hallmark of your life: not peace but a sword...My second suggestion is about inclusion. As a church in your life together and as you send each other back and forth to serve the everyday world you will do your level best never to reject and exclude those you confront.'

*The Rev'd Dr Michael Taylor,  
Charge to the United Reformed Church, 1 April 2000*



## Reflection

*In his charge at the Unifying Assembly between the URC UK and the Congregational Union of Scotland, Michael Taylor asked whether the image of the wolf lying down with the lamb was 'sentimental nonsense or a stunning image of unity in Christ'. He believed unity in Christ could only be achieved through complex costly argument and inclusion. As I reflect upon my 22 years of experience of the United Reformed Church, I think complex costly argument and inclusion have been hallmarks of our life.*

*My first General Assembly in 2000 included the proposals for an ecumenical bishop in East Cardiff. Could the URC support this pioneering ecumenical appointment - one which raised questions about our understanding of episcopate (the ministry of oversight), all ministries being open to women and men, and having different provisions for ministry across three nations? General Assembly did, though the decisions of other partners meant that the appointment did not progress. Other equally costly complex arguments have taken place over many years on questions of human sexuality and marriage equality.*

*The commitment to live as people of complex, costly argument and inclusion, seems to me to embody paragraph 8 of the Basis of Union:*

*'The United Reformed Church has been formed in obedience to the call to repent of what has been amiss in the past and to be reconciled. It sees its formation and growth as a part of what God is doing to make his people one, and as a united church will take, wherever possible and with all speed, further steps towards the unity of all God's people.'*

*Our calling includes the quest for unity, inside and outwith the Church, by calling out injustice and prejudice; confessing our complicity and taking positive action so that all are truly included and welcomed in the oikumene, the household of God.*

## Questions



- How does your congregation bear witness to and work for justice?
- Where has the URC, and your local congregations, been part of calling out injustice?
- How might your church better reflect Lindsey Sanderson's idea that all are to be truly included in God's household?

## Prayer



Confronting and yet including God,  
through the leading of the Spirit  
prompt us to engage in the costly complex arguments of our day.  
Expand the boundaries of our comfort zones,  
remove the scales of prejudice and injustice from our eyes,  
give us courage to take action in the face of much greater opposition  
so that all may be welcomed into the community of your Church  
and share fully in the feast of abundant life. Amen



Lindsey Sanderson’s perspective, from the former Congregational Union of Scotland, that “the unity we’re called to pursue is both within and outwith the Church and involves the pursuit of justice” is reflected in URC minister the Rev’d Dominic Grant’s hymn written for our jubilee.

### Hymn The Earth Is Yours, O Lord Our God

© The Rev’d Dominic Grant, Tune: How Can I Keep From Singing?



The earth is yours, O Lord our God,  
and everything that’s in it;  
mere aliens and tenants we,  
yet still we strive to win it.  
So easily seduced and swayed  
by Empire’s brash occlusion,  
we overlook your leasehold-terms:  
“enjoyment, not exclusion”.

2: And on this cusp of Jubilee  
we’ve recognised temptation  
to seek to ‘wow’ a fickle crowd,  
sidestepping true vocation.  
But we believe  
you’ve brought us here  
to strengthen and re-wild us,  
to hear afresh and trust anew  
the call that once beguiled us.

3: Therefore with thanks for all that’s past,  
we hold firm in the present,  
anticipating future hope  
unceasing, incandescent –  
a hope that shapes and changes us,  
a free space that we enter,  
a rule of hospitality  
with Jesus at the centre.

4: And till that final Jubilee  
of reset and redemption,  
we’ll pledge to live in faithfulness  
to your declared intention.  
Refreshed and reconditioned here,  
you send us now in mission:  
to give the Church a mighty shake,  
or such is our tradition!



David Thompson and Lindsey Sanderson see the unions that formed the URC as starting places, albeit in a longer process, for our mission and ministry now whereas the Rev’d James Breslin offers an interesting historical perspective. Now, we listen to a reading from Ezra.

### Ezra 3:10-13



When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever towards Israel.’ And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

### Reflection



Fifty years ago the United Reformed Church was presented as the first step towards a greater union. There were many who, unimpressed by that rhetoric, saw it as the end of a process that had been debated for centuries.

During the 16th century “Marian Exile” Presbyterians and Independents argued over the nature of the Church and how it should be governed. The return to England, after

the death of Mary Tudor, enabled these arguments to continue. Whilst the Presbyterians gained a victory during the English Civil war, the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and the subsequent enforcement of Episcopacy led Presbyterians and Congregationalists, now persecuted religious minorities, to the first of several attempts to overcome their differences. The *Happy Union* of 1690 proved neither happy nor a union and collapsed after a mere four years. Nevertheless, attempts to reconcile the differences between the two communions continued. The 18th Century saw most English Presbyterian Churches drift into Unitarianism leading to a de facto union as many orthodox Presbyterian Congregations became Congregationalist. The 19th Century saw several Presbyterian groups unite to create the Presbyterian Church of England and, at the same time, Congregationalists organise themselves into County Unions - later into a Church in its own right. Presbyterians and Congregationalists then had several attempts to unite until finally, in 1972, union was achieved by the creation of the URC.

Sadly, at each stage some found themselves unable to join into the larger union and remained outside. Both Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, and later on the Churches of Christ which joined the URC in 1981, experienced the pain of having to part from those whom they considered family. Thus while for some the fact that after 50 years the URC still exists is seen as a failure of ecumenism, for others it is a successful conclusion of a four hundred year struggle.

### Questions



- Our forebears were very interested in how the Church was to be governed – bishops or councils, priest/minister or Elders/Church Meeting etc. How important is the way we are governed to you? Is this a vital aspect of our life together?
- What might you change in the way your local church or the wider URC is governed?
- If, as James Breslin suggests, the formation of the URC was the happy culmination in a 300 year process, what should our task be now? To seek further unions or to see our purpose as something different (if so, what?)
- Each union has, paradoxically, caused pain and separation with a minority of congregations remaining out of the unions. Has this further division, in the face of union, impaired our life and ministry?

### Prayer



O God, we give thanks for those who down the ages have been moved to build and sustain our Church. We remember with gratitude the worship, prayer, and witness of those whose efforts created the United Reformed Church. We give thanks for those with gifts in hymnody and prayer who during these 50 years have enriched and encouraged the whole of Christ's church. Amen.

We take a moment to be quiet and reflect on all that we've heard and learned in this session.

## **Hymn Writers**

*The Rev'd Sue McCoan* is a URC minister serving Ealing St Andrew's and Wembley Park URCs

*The Rev'd Dr Colin Thompson* is a retired URC minister living in Oxford.

*The Rev'd Dominic Grant* is minister of St Andrew's URC Chesterfield Road and Barnet Wood Street URC in Barnett, in London.

## **Contributors**

*The Revd Professor David Thompson* is a non-stipendiary minister in Cambridge. He was a Churches of Christ observer on the original Presbyterian-Congregational Joint Committee in 1963-72, President of the Churches of Christ Annual Conference in 1979-80, and Moderator of the General Assembly, 1996-97.

*The Rev'd Lindsey Sanderson* is Chaplain to the Moderator of General Assembly and minister of the Hamilton and East Kilbride Joint Pastorate in the Synod of Scotland.

*The Rev'd James Breslin* is a retired minister living in Nottingham.



## Session 3 Some Challenges



In this session we think of some of the challenges we've encountered in our tradition – along with the joy they bring – the ordination of women, the challenge always to the State, and the internal challenge of how the Church is governed. The third verse in our first hymn, written by URC member Jill Jenkins, reflects on the challenges to faith.

### Hymn *Living God, your joyful Spirit*

Jill Jenkins 1937 – c2020 Tune: RS sets this to Abbots Leigh but the Rev'd Malcolm Fife has written another tune to it which can be found online – see the notes at the end of this session.



Living God, your joyful Spirit  
breaks the bounds of time & space,  
rests in love upon your people,  
drawn together in this place.  
Here we join in glad thanksgiving,  
here rejoice to pray and praise:  
Lord of all our past traditions,  
Lord of all our future days.

3: Lord, when we grow tired of giving,  
feel frustration, hurt and strain,  
by your Spirit's quiet compulsion,  
draw us back to you again.  
Guide us through the bitter searching  
when our confidence is lost;  
give us hope from desolation,  
arms outstretched upon a cross.

2: As your bread may we be broken,  
scattered in community;  
we who know  
your greatest blessings  
called to share Christ's ministry.  
May we gently lead each other,  
share our hunger and our thirst;  
learn that only through  
our weakness  
shall we know the strength of Christ.

4: Living God, your power surrounds us,  
as we face the way Christ trod,  
challenge us to fresh commitment  
to the purposes of God:  
called to share a new creation,  
called to preach a living word,  
promised all the joys of heaven,  
through the grace of Christ our Lord.



One aspect of our “past traditions” is our commitment to the ministry of both women and men. The Rev'd Dr Kirsty Thorpe reflects on how ideas of good order in worship have been used to silence women but, first, we hear a passage from St Paul which has been used to oppress and silence women.

### 1 Corinthians 14. 26-40



When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

(As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order.

## Reflection



Kirsty writes:

*'Women should be silent in the churches' is not likely to be a popular Jubilee text in United Reformed Churches this year. We're proud of inheriting a pioneering role in women's ministry in the early 20th century and try to promote lay and ordained women's voices and gifts.*

*It may be tempting to avoid Bible passages we disagree with but growing up means engaging with awkward realities. Reformed Christians should work out why texts were written and how to interpret them. In this case that helps us respond to Christians who quote this to justify blocking women's ministry.*

*The apostle Paul never intended his advice to one divided, chaotic church in first century Greece to be a permanent rule for all churches everywhere. Nor did he expect women to be totally silent when in church. That is clear from 1 Corinthians 11 verse 13 which is about whether a woman should veil her head when praying publicly.*

*Women and men probably sat separately in congregations like that in Corinth. Some women might have had trouble following a sermon in posh Greek without a male relative alongside to ask. Most of them would have spoken only a local dialect and not have been educated, unlike their male relatives.*

*Paul's comment has been used for 2000 years to stop women teaching, preaching, praying and prophesying. It was only intended to prevent a few women from calling out questions in a single congregation so they sought explanations at home instead.*

*In 1917, weeks after Constance Coltman became the first woman minister in the Congregational Union of England and Wales, her Anglican friend Maude Royden started as pulpit assistant at City Temple Congregational Church, London. Despite being a popular preacher, she faced strong opposition. Dr Fort Newton, the minister, constantly received postcards citing this text from 1 Corinthians. Thankfully he took no notice and kept supporting women's proclamation of God's good news, just as the United Reformed Church has done and will keep doing.*

## Questions



- How has the ordained ministry of women been a blessing to you?
- How should we deal with difficult passages in the Bible such as this one from 1 Corinthians?
- What might we mean when we say of the URC: *It acknowledges the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people.*

Basis of Union para 12

## Prayer



Spirit of God, you keep calling people to preach and teach,  
to pray and prophesy,  
to serve and reach out in all forms of ministry  
and build your Church.

We thank you that your call is inclusive and wide-reaching.

You reach out to people regardless of their gender, race, age or education,  
their life experience, gifts or other plans.

Renew us as we respond afresh to your call, now and always. Amen



Kirsty Thorpe reminds us of our need to question Scriptural passages which have been used to oppress – such an engagement with the Bible is a key part of our tradition. The Rev'd Fleur Houston reminds us now that another part of our tradition is a critical attitude to the state. First we sing a hymn by G K Chesterton – a Roman Catholic so not a member of one our traditions. He was a peculiar type of socialist looking back to a feudal past which really didn't exist, a novelist who had many attitudes which we'd now find very problematic but, had a fierce passion for social justice that reflects many Old Testament passages which led to his inclusion in *Rejoice and Sing*. In this hymn he had some very non-conformist things to say about the State:

### Hymn O God of Earth and Altar

*G. K. Chesterton (1874 - 1936) R&S 346 Tune: King's Lynn*



O God of earth and altar,  
bow down and hear our cry,  
our earthly rulers falter,  
our people drift and die;  
the walls of gold entomb us,  
the swords of scorn divide,  
take not thy thunder from us,  
but take away our pride.

2: From all that terror teaches,  
from lies of tongue and pen,  
from all the easy speeches  
that comfort cruel men,  
from sale and profanation  
of honour and the sword,  
from sleep and from damnation,  
deliver us, good Lord!

3: Tie in a living tether the prince and priest and thrall,  
bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all;  
in ire and exultation aflame with faith, and free,  
lift up a living nation, a single sword to thee.

### Acts 5. 27-32



When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, We gave you strict orders not to teach in his name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

### Reflection



Fleur Houston writes:

*This is a collective witness to Christ's authority. Peter and John had already affirmed that they were constrained to obey God above human authorities – now all the apostles*

*testify in the Holy Spirit to the power of the Resurrection.*

*We are reminded of this every time we attend an ordination service. As the Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church is read, we affirm these words: We believe that the government of the church is distinct from the government of the State, and the Church is not subordinate to the State in things that affect obedience to God.*

*The statement has historical significance.*

*When the Presbyterian Church of England came into being in 1876 it brought together many strains of Scottish Presbyterianism (in England) with different attitudes to the relationship between Church and State. A significant number of these proclaimed the spiritual independence of the Church with evangelical fervour and emotional intensity, opposing the encroachment by civil authorities into Scottish Church affairs, whereas in England this was not a live issue for Presbyterians. Yet 50 years ago, the URC included this statement as a vital element of our core beliefs*

*So what substance can we give these words today? In an imperfect world, we are conscious of times when the Church is challenged to confess, often at great cost, where its true allegiance lies. The brave stance taken by the Confessing Church in Germany against the Reich is a prime example. Today's devastating war in Ukraine cannot be justified by any Christian spirit. In repentance and in hope, in war and in peace, we are reminded of our calling to place above all earthly powers our loyalty to Jesus Christ in whom alone "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given." Matthew 28. 18.*

## Questions



- Given we live in an increasingly secular age in the UK, does it matter that there are still 26 Church of England bishops in the House of Lords and that the government has a role in appointing bishops and other senior clerics? (If it does matter – why, if it doesn't – why not?)
- Politicians don't like it when the Church criticises the State – most recently the churches critiqued government plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. Should the Church mind its own business when it comes to politics?
- Should churches be active in local politics as well as around national and international issues? If so how might your church share its views and be active in local issues?

## Prayer



Ever-living and ever-loving God,  
You sent your Son to bring us truth  
And your Spirit to make us holy  
May we be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ,  
That your name may be great among the nations. Amen



The churches raised their voices recently to protest government proposals to remove asylum seekers to Rwanda. Since then, the inevitable court cases have revealed that the civil service advised that such a course of action would be both illegal and immoral, given our obligations under the United Nations Convention on Refugees and Rwanda's poor record on human rights. Retired URC minister, the Rev'd Ruth Dillon, wrote the following hymn reflecting on the plight of those who flee here for refuge from cruel wars, grinding poverty, and ruthless oppression.

### A Hymn for Refugees

© The Rev'd Ruth Dillon 2015 Tune Scarlett Ribbons



See them line the dusty pathways, burdened with the pains of life. Walking from their ruined homeland, memories shattered left behind. God, we see your tears & suffering in the child, the youth the aged; Open now the gates of Justice! Open now the gates of Love!	2: As we watch and see your people, Stranger in a stranger land. Searching for a liberation, yearning for an outstretched hand. Now comes death and then refusal, What will bar our way to peace? Open now the gates of Welcome! Open now the gates of Grace!
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3: Christ we see your face among them, give acceptance one and all.  
No more questions, no more queries, move our hearts to stop their fall.  
Spirit, help us lift your people, carry loads too hard to bear.  
Open now the gates of Heaven! Open now the gates of Hope !



Kirsty Thorpe addressed issues of Biblical authority, Fleur Houston looked at the competing authorities of the Church and the State, but now John Ellis, a former Moderator of General Assembly and URC Treasurer, looks at how authority is exercised in both local churches and our wider denomination. First we listen to some words from St Matthew's Gospel.

### St Matthew 16: 13 - 20



Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.



### Reflection

John Ellis writes:

*As many stained-glass windows remind us, Peter gets the keys. When that wonderful passion for visible unity brought the United Reformed Church into being, many of the most tricky negotiations were around who would get the keys. Presbyterians were anxious that the Elders would have to hand them over to an ill-equipped Church Meeting; Congregationalists wanted them kept in a local cupboard not held by some remote authority body.*

*Assumptions about where the keys to church life are held seem to have shifted markedly, if gradually, over our fifty years. In the early years, debates at General Assembly about baptismal practice, or who could preside at the sacraments, or whether Elders could be Freemasons, implicitly assumed that these were matters on which the whole denomination should be held within a consistent policy. A generation later, the Assembly decided quite explicitly that it did not need to have a policy on same sex relationships and would choose not to have one; instead it handed those keys over to local congregations to lock or unlock as they deemed right in their settings.*

*Across local congregations, diversity rules. There are examples where the dedicated service of an individual Minister or Elder has sadly degenerated into that person clinging tightly onto all the keys and strangling initiative. There are the examples where the Church Meeting still is the real centre of discernment, with the aid of high attendance, lively respectful debate, and much prayer. Perhaps, in the majority of cases, the keys are now with the Elders, heightening concern about whether the congregation is growing enough excellent spiritual leaders to fill the seats on the Elders Meeting.*

*And if those who pay the piper eventually call the tune, we should notice that the Synods are accumulating wealth at an unprecedented rate.*

*One way of asking what the URC will evolve into next is to ask who will hold the keys.*

## Questions



- How are decisions made in your local congregation? Is your Church Meeting lively, engaging and a key part of your church life or moribund and boring or something in between?
- What might you do to make your Church Meetings (even) better?

## Prayer



Jesus, Messiah, Son of the Living God

We join in Peter's affirmation but shrink at Peter's responsibility.

We rejoice in freedom from State control but wonder about our structures.

As the United Reformed Church continues to evolve:

give us honesty about who holds the keys;

give us wisdom about who should hold the keys;

give us creativity in matching aspiration with reality.

Make us the people who help others access the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

We take a moment to be quiet and reflect on all that we've heard and learned in this session.

## Hymn Writers

*Jill Jenkins* was a member of Palmers' Green URC and her hymn, *Living God Your Joyful Spirit* was included in Rejoice and Sing at 530 and set to the tune Abbots Leigh. The Rev'd Anne Sardeson's forthcoming book *Fifty Hymns for Fifty Years* suggests a different tune written by URC minister Malcolm Fife which draws out the deeply reflective and spiritual nature of the hymn. You can hear this version here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5li2nef1rw>

*Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (29 May 1874 – 14 June 1936) was an English writer, philosopher, lay theologian, and literary and art critic. Chesterton created the fictional priest-detective Father Brown, and wrote on apologetics. Chesterton routinely referred to himself as an "orthodox" Christian, and came to identify this position more and more with Catholicism, eventually converting to Roman Catholicism from high church Anglicanism. His one hymn is in Rejoice and Sing.

*The Rev'd Ruth Dillon* is a retired URC minister living in Exmouth having served in Mersey, North Western and Wessex Synods.

## Contributors

*The Rev'd Dr Kirsty Thorpe* is minister of Wilmslow URC, Cheshire, and a former Moderator of General Assembly.

*The Rev'd Fleur Houston* is a retired minister and member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

*John Ellis* is the Leader of the West Kent and East Sussex Area of the Southern Synod of the URC and a former Moderator of General Assembly.

## Session 4 Reforming in Ordinary



In our final session reflecting on themes stimulated by our Jubilee we think about our ongoing work as a church with perspectives from a former General Secretary, our Moderator and our current General Secretary. First we sing a hymn by URC Minister The Rev'd Anne Sardeson where acknowledge the struggle to remember the God is with us in everything, and encourages us to remember that this has always been the case. St Patrick's Breast Plate speaks of God above us, before us, beside us, and behind us and Anne reflects in song the reality of that idea.

### Hymn *Come sing of our God*

© Anne J. Sardeson 2012 Tune *The Bard of Armagh* (RS 583)



Come sing of our God  
who is always before us:  
calling and guiding us  
through the unknown.  
Come sing of our God  
who is always before us:  
harvesting fruit  
from the seeds long past sown.

2: Come sing of our God,  
who is always behind us:  
keeping a past we will never forget.  
Come sing of our God  
who is always behind us:  
holding with care  
all that we might regret.

3: Come sing of our God  
who is always beside us:  
Source of our hope  
in the plans that we make.  
Come sing of our God  
who is always beside us:  
Ground of our being:  
The Road that we take!

4: Come sing of our God  
who is always around us:  
On distant horizon,  
in quiet whispered word.  
Come sing of our God  
who is always around us:  
Lifting our lives with a song not yet heard.



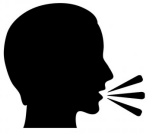
The Rev'd Dr David Cornick, a former General Secretary, reflects on ordinary, everyday, faithful saints who make up our church across our three nations and whose lives reflect the discipleship Anne Sardeson wrote of in that first hymn. First we read from St John's Gospel.

### St John 6:1-14



After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'





## Reflection

David writes

*For nine years I had the privilege of teaching church history at Westminster College. Church historians, it seems to me, hold the keys to the Church's treasure chest, and its skeleton cupboard! Historians, of all the Church's servants, are peculiarly aware of the humanity of the Church. They are constrained by the traces that people leave behind them, with the biases that brings – clergy rather than lay people, rather more men than women, the articulate and able rather than those differently gifted.*

*As I look back over fifty years of the URC, it is the URC's 'saints' that I am profoundly grateful for. Some have been big canvas men and women, those whose words and actions will be sifted by future historians. Most aren't. They are ordinary folk who came to our doors with their five loaves and two fish, and without realising it found themselves turned into blessings for other people. My personal pantheon includes two middle aged women who had a vision of a lunch club for the lonely that transformed the lives of generations of elderly people, a Junior Church leader whose care for the young people extended to taking them all to a Christmas pantomime so their parents could breathe in the run up to Christmas, and some remarkable non-stipendiary ministers who gifted churches with Word and Sacraments despite the almost impossible demands their day jobs were making on them. But the list expands to include those who turned sickness and misfortune into the stuff of discipleship, and those whose patient love for those struggling with the difficulties of old age was transformative and life-enhancing, true demonstrations of Christian love.*

*Most of that escapes the eye and pen of the historian, but God rejoices in the faithfulness of that United Reformed Church.*

## Questions

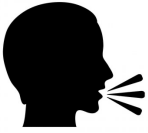


- David Cornick contrasts the great and the good who are noticed by Church historians and the ordinary saints who escape such attention. Who are the ordinary saints in your congregation?
- What ordinary things could you do with your congregation to make a difference in the lives of its members and your local community?

## Prayer



Gracious God  
Your love has touched the URC and called forth disciples.  
We give thanks for those who have been examples to us,  
who helped us on the journey of faith  
and opened windows into the wonder of your kingdom.  
Take our loaves and fishes,  
and transform them into your people's nourishment,  
that they may speak your Word,  
that the world may know Christ as Lord  
and return to You in praise and thanksgiving. Amen.



The Rev'd Alan Gaunt's popular hymn, *Eternal God, Your Love's Tremendous Glory* reminds us, in the last verse of some of what David Cornick wrote as we ask God to complete the divine image within us as ordinary saints.

**Hymn** *Eternal God, Your Love's Tremendous Glory*

Alan Gaunt (1935 - ) © 1991 Stainer & Bell Ltd Tune: Charterhouse



Eternal God, your love's tremendous glory  
cascades through life in overflowing grace,  
to tell creation's meaning in the story  
of love evolving love from time and space.

2: Eternal Son of God, uniquely precious,  
in you, deserted, scorned and crucified,  
God's love has fathomed sin and death's deep darkness,  
and flawed humanity is glorified.

3: Eternal Spirit, with us like a mother,  
embracing us in love serene and pure:  
you nurture strength to follow Christ our brother,  
as full-grown children, confident and sure.

4: Love's trinity, self-perfect, self-sustaining;  
love which commands, enables and obeys:  
you give yourself, in boundless joy, creating  
one vast increasing harmony of praise.

5: We ask you now, complete your image in us;  
this love of yours, our source and guide and goal.  
May love in us seek love and serve love's purpose,  
till we ascend with Christ and find love whole.



Alan Gaunt's powerful insight that the Trinity - self-perfect and self-sustaining - commands, enables, and obeys has a resonance with the Rev'd Dr John Bradbury's reflection on the idea, in Reformed Christianity, that the Church is always being reformed in the light of God's Word. First, we listen to two ideas from the book of Isaiah

**Isaiah 43: 18-19**

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.



**Isaiah 46: 8-11**

Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors,  
remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand,  
and I will fulfil my intention', calling a bird of prey from the east,  
the man for my purpose from a far country.  
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it.

## Reflection



John writes

*Within the space of three chapters, the writer of Isaiah entirely contradicts themselves. Are we to remember the former things, or NOT remember them? A treasure at the heart of the Reformed Tradition is the way we return anew to Scripture in every time and place, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, hear something new.*

*A slogan emerged in the Reformed tradition, *Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda Est Secundum Verbum Dei*, 'The Reformed Church, always Reforming according to the Word of God'. We turn back to the Word of God in Scripture and, centrally, the Word of God made incarnate in Christ. In response to the perpetually fresh thing we hear, we reform the proclamation of the Church in ways that become the living Word of God in our own time and place. We re-form Church itself.*

*The Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church: "The United Reformed Church, under the authority of Holy Scripture and in corporate responsibility to Jesus Christ its ever living head, acknowledges its duty to be open at all times to the leading of the Holy Spirit and therefore affirms its right to make such new declarations of its faith and for such purposes as may from time to time be required by obedience to the same Spirit."*

*At our best, following the call of Isaiah, we remember the former things of old that God has done for us, and the plans God has for us. We also forget the things of old that tie us down, holding us back from responding to the blowing of the winds of the Spirit in our midst today. My prayer is that this year of Jubilee will recall us to be the most faithful church we can be. Remembering and forgetting, ever faithful to the Word of God come amongst us in Christ.*

## Questions



- What are the things we've done well over the last 50 years – as a denomination and in your local church?
- What are the things we need to let go of as they tie us down now?

## Prayer



Living God,  
we give you thanks for the gift of your Spirit:  
opening our ears to hear anew;  
opening our eyes to see anew;  
opening our hearts to you anew.  
May we set down the human traditions that hold us back;  
treasure the tradition of your Word that leads us on;  
be a people who faithfully forget;  
and a people who faithfully remember.  
In Jesus name we pray. Amen.



The Moderator of General Assembly, the Rev'd Fiona Bennett, concludes our reflections on the Jubilee by musing on how the first disciples had to fulfil their mission in uncertain times drawing parallels with our calling now. Our final hymn in this series is A F Bayley's reflection on those first disciples and their mission showing how we join with them.

**Hymn** *A Glorious Company We Sing*

A F Bayly (1901 - 1984) altd.\* 570 R&S Tune St Magnus "The Head That once Was Crowned with Thorns" This was written for a celebration, in 1946, at what was then Morpeth Congregational Church.



A glorious company we sing,  
the Master and his friends,  
he sent them forth to tell his love,  
and all his love intends.

3: A loving company we sing,  
whom Jesus sent to save  
the sick, the hungry and the blind,  
the outcast and the slave.

2: A faithful company we sing,  
the steadfast martyr band;  
for Christ & for his kingdom's cause  
they boldly made their stand.

4: We join this glorious company  
of Jesus and his friends,  
to spread throughout this troubled world  
his love that never ends.



Sometimes when we reflect on our past we are tempted to think that our best days are behind us – easy enough given the context in which we're called to minister. So we end these series of reflections with some encouragement from Fiona Bennett. First, a reading from St Matthew where Jesus assures his followers of his ongoing presence.

**St Matthew 28:16-20**



Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

**Reflection**



Fiona writes:

*The disciples who came to the mountain had been through numerous adventures and encounters with Jesus, so on that mountain in Galilee, what did they doubt?*

*Did they doubt Jesus' message? Ability? Authority?*

*Did they doubt the wisdom of the task which lay ahead?*

*Did they doubt their own ability?*

*Perhaps all of the above.*

*The mountain was a liminal place, with endings and new beginnings. For the community of his disciples tasked to share his good news with the whole world, it was the end of the resurrected Jesus appearing physically amongst them and the start of living with Jesus in a new way. The future without a physical Jesus must have felt very*

*daunting and their calling to be his tasked community, could have seemed overwhelming. I am amazed that only some doubted!*

*Jesus spoke to their doubt by inviting them to see things not from a place of scarcity but abundance.*

*Just as for those first disciples and for many of our URC ancestors, so we find ourselves marking our 50th Jubilee amidst times which may seem daunting and overwhelming. The Covid pandemic has changed us and rapidly crystallised many of our institutional challenges. We are emerging into a world with much uncertainty. Do we too at times find ourselves doubting Jesus' message or wisdom, or our ability as a church to be transformed, or the hope of our world being transformed? When we do, I trust that Jesus invites us to see things from his perspective of abundance. He speaks to our doubt, saying "I've got this! There is nothing in all creation which can stop or extinguish the message, the way, the hope which I have shown you. So, have confidence in me and step out there to share with the whole world what I have shared with you. And even when you can't see me, know that I am always with you."*



## Questions

- Given Fiona's words, what gives you hope for the future of our denomination?
- What gives you hope for your local congregation?

## Prayer



Holy One,  
open my mind and heart...  
to live from abundance,  
to trust in Jesus' message of God's unconditional love for all, and  
to be transformed and share in God's work transforming our world. Amen

## Hymn Writers

*The Rev'd Anne Sardeson is a URC minister serving in Southminster & Maldon.*

*The Rev'd Alan Gaunt is a retired URC minister living on the Wirral having served in Barrow, Keighley, Sunderland, Heswell, South West Manchester and Windermere.*

*The Rev'd Albert F. Bayly was born in 1901 in Bexhill on Sea, Sussex. Educated at London University and Mansfield College, he was ordained to the Congregationalist ministry in the late 1920s and died in 1984. He retired in 1971 and was active in his local URC.*

## Contributors

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