

# Paper 14

## Reinvigorating the Ecumenical Vision of the United Reformed Church Part 2

### Mission Committee

#### Basic information

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<b>Action required</b>	Decision.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Resolution 38</b> 1. <b>General Assembly endorses the measures for ecumenical working and resource sharing outlined in Reinvigorating the Ecumenical Vision of the URC Part 2 and encourages Synods to consider how they might make use of them to assist in addressing the areas of under-resourcing of our ecumenical commitments and in developing new ecumenical relationships.</b>  <b>Resolution 39</b> 2. <b>General Assembly instructs the Ministries Committee to allocate six ministry of Word and Sacraments posts, available to Synods by application and open to all Ministers of Word and Sacraments with a specific call to ecumenical working, and which will not reduce Synod stipendiary ministry deployment targets, to provide ordained ministry of word and sacrament in identified local ecumenical contexts, whether existing or new.</b>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To offer practical steps to reinvigorate the ecumenical vision of the United Reformed Church.
<b>Main points</b>	An update of the action taken by Mission Committee in response to Resolution 16d passed at the 2022 General Assembly. Conclusions drawn from that action.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Paper I1 of the GA2022 Book of Reports – Reinvigorating the ecumenical vision of the United Reformed Church.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Mission Committee; Ministries Committee; Faith and Order Committee; Synod Moderators; Synod Ecumenical Officers;

	Methodist/URC Liaison Group, National Ecumenical Officers, URC Youth Executive.
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## Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	All anticipated within current budgets.
<b>External (eg ecumenical)</b>	The measures proposed, if adopted, will increase the level of support offered to local ecumenical working, addressing some areas where there has been an under resourcing of our ecumenical commitments. The proposals have been received enthusiastically by ecumenical partners and so there would be a positive impact in maintaining and developing ecumenical relationships.

## 1. Introduction

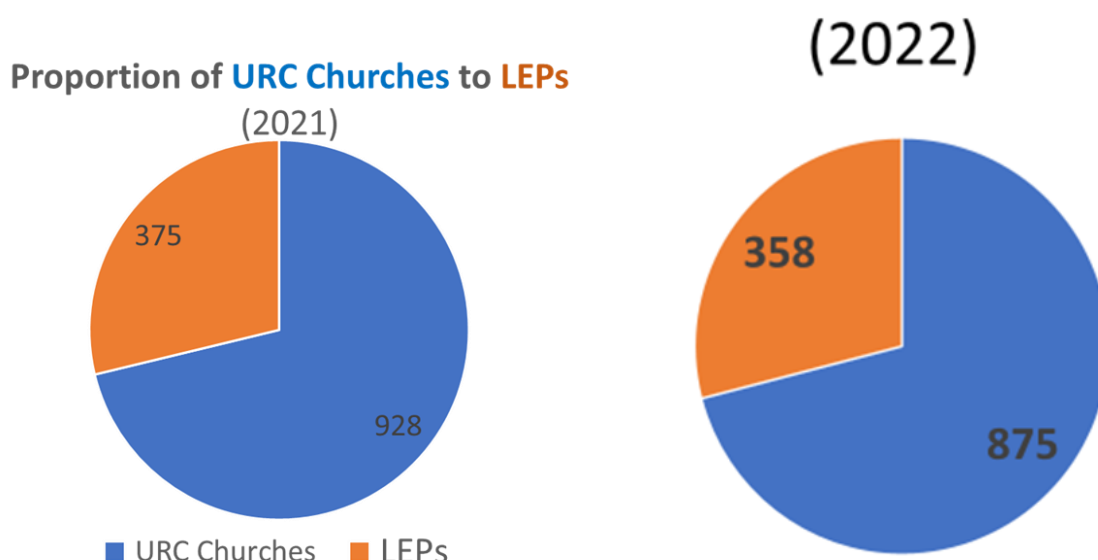
- 1.1 At General Assembly 2022, in our Jubilee year, the report from Mission Committee reminded the Church of the ecumenical hopes at its foundation in 1972.
- 1.2 A set of resolutions were passed acknowledging areas of under resourcing, affirming our commitment to our ecumenical vision and instructing Mission Committee to look for practical ways to resource our ecumenical commitments, particularly at a local level.
- 1.3 Since then, Mission Committee has comprehensively consulted with those on the ground, particularly our Synod Ecumenical Officers and Moderators, to get a clearer picture of the challenges that the URC faces in supporting its LEPs and to propose some of the practical resources that have emerged. This engagement has taken place in full cooperation with Ministries Committee and the Secretary for Ministries.
- 1.4 We are grateful to URC Youth for their enthusiastic support of these resolutions. In January at Youth Assembly 2023, some members of URC Youth wanted to highlight that relationships and partnerships between local churches, especially between churches with more financial and other resources and those with less, were a vital part of ensuring that mission takes place to its fullest potential in local communities. As a result, Youth Assembly passed a resolution encouraging local churches to develop concrete relationships with other churches in order to share resources, not limited to the URC denomination.
- 1.5 Aware that Mission Committee was already working on similar resolutions, responding to an instruction from the 2022 General Assembly, the URC Youth Executive has worked with Mission Committee to embody and put into action the intent of the Youth Assembly resolution within this paper and resolutions.

## 2. Local Ecumenical Partnerships Update

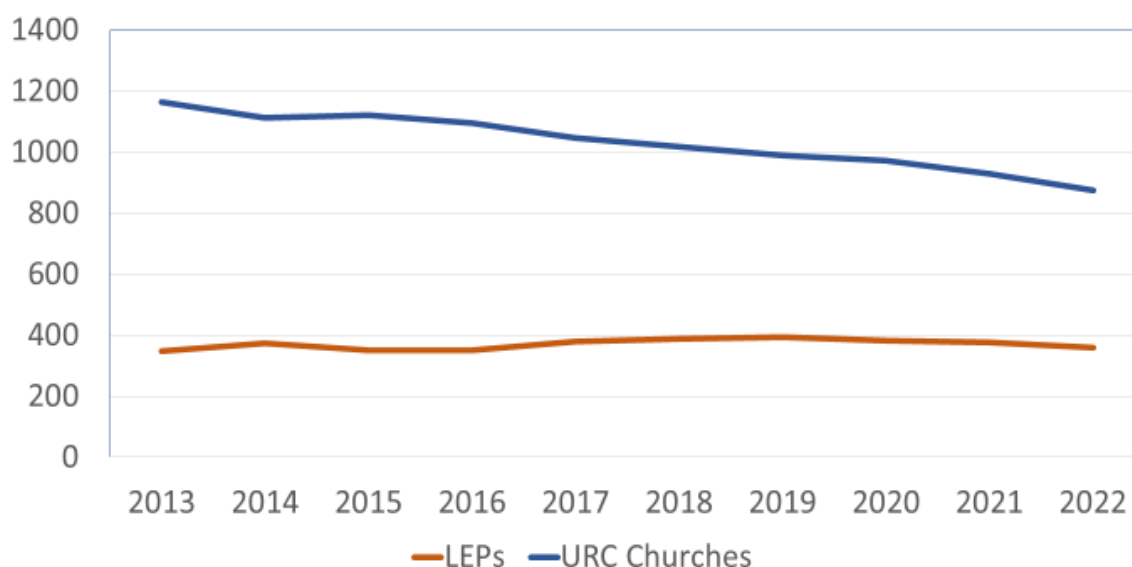
- 2.1 Resolution 16a) at GA2022 affirmed “that LEPs continue to be central to the ecumenical mission and vision of the URC”.
- 2.2 The general picture is that churches are working very well together ecumenically on social action projects, in such areas as foodbanks, warm hubs and refugee support. Formal ecumenical arrangements, however, are faltering in some places,

with deployment and finances most likely to be leading to difficulties in relationships.

- 2.3 From a URC perspective, the most recent Annual Church Returns show a continuing trend of LEPs closing at a slower rate than single congregation URCs, as indicated in last year’s ecumenical report to General Assembly. Below are the updated comparisons in graph format:



## Decline in **URC Churches** versus **LEPs**



### 3. Counting LEP membership in the URC

- 3.1 Resolution 16b) at GA2022 reminded: “Synods and local churches that joint or ecumenical members of LEPs have always been and remain members of the URC, not just those who were members of the URC at the formation of the LEP.”

- 3.2 As stated in the 2022 Report (3.5 and 3.6): “In many cases, churches only count the residual URC membership, meaning those URC members registered at the inception of the LEP, and who identify solely as URC... In an established LEP, joint members will usually represent the largest proportion (if not all) of its membership roll. It is an ecumenical principle that joint members are regarded as full members of **all** the participating denominations. Our Methodist and Baptist colleagues include all joint members in their annual statistics, as opposed to the URC situation where, at best, only a proportion are included and, at worst, none.” The 2022 General Assembly resolution confirmed that “joint members have always been and remain members of the URC”.
- 3.3 We are now in a position to provide a much clearer indication of the importance of our LEPs to the denomination. For the first time last year, we collected additional data on the number of joint LEP members. The analysis is drawn on the latest annual survey, where an impressive 89% of LEPs (319 churches) submitted data. This information shows that the numerical size of LEP congregations on average is larger than a single congregation local URC. They recorded 8,091 joint members with an additional 3,666 people who identified their membership as purely URC (out of an overall LEP membership for this return of 18,357 members). Combining the joint and URC only members (all of whom are full members of the URC) from the 89% of LEPs which provided information, brings a total of just under 12,000 members. This is a substantial number, given the URC’s overall number of members. Significantly, they represent a cohort which currently is not fully included in the URC’s membership statistics, nor in scoping for ministry.
- 4. Addressing the areas of under-resourcing of our ecumenical commitments**
- 4.1 The impact of undercounting URC membership in LEPs has an impact on the calculations for the deployment of ministers in Synods. It means that Synods are restricted in their ability to provide ministry for these LEPs. As a result, there is a tendency to provide less resourcing for our LEPs and to view them as being detached from the URC. With less allocation of resource, the LEPs often struggle to maintain their URC identity and sense of connectedness.
- 4.2 Anecdotally, our Synod Ecumenical Officers have also indicated that the URC, as a consequence, is seen by some local and regional ecumenical partners to be neglecting or withdrawing from their ecumenical responsibilities, which has led to a breakdown in relationships and trust. There is clearly a need to redress the balance, which leads to the substance behind the second resolution in this report, drawn up by the Secretary for Ministries below.
- 4.3 The Ministries Office is responsible for producing the deployment statistics for each Synod on an annual basis according to the formula set by General Assembly. As the number of full-time stipendiary equivalents (FTE) decreases, Synods have to make hard decisions about where stipendiary ministry needs to be placed. This is sometimes to the detriment of ecumenical vacancies and in the belief that the other denominations will find ministry for these posts. This has led to an erosion of the URC’s ecumenical credibility. Therefore, Ministries Committee supports the proposal from the Mission Committee to allocate the six posts outside of the normal deployment quota.
- 4.4 Six posts may seem an odd number given the number of Synods, but Ministries Committee feels this is a fair number in light of current ministry statistics. It is the

intention for these posts to be outside a Synod's allocation of FTE for our ministry statistics thus enabling Synods to declare vacancies and not be wildly over their target number of FTE. Each post will be for a period of seven years. These posts are not designed to be synod-wide, but for specific and identified local ecumenical contexts. Applications from Synods for such ecumenical posts should be made in writing to the Ministries Office using the attached proforma. The Accreditations (SCM&CRCW) Sub-Committee will be the final arbiter for the accrediting of such posts with advice from the Secretary for Ministries and the Deputy General Secretary (Mission).

## **5. Existing and new ways to resource and support ecumenical working**

### **5.1 Existing routes for deployment to LEPs**

5.1.1 There are several existing options that Synods can adopt to support the deployment of Ministers of Word and Sacraments to LEPs.

5.1.2 These include:

- a) Using Certificates of Limited Service, where 50% and under of a minister from another denomination falls outside of deployment.
- b) When a retired minister takes up a 30% role, deployment figures are not affected, **subject to Ministries Committee approval at their May meeting.**
- c) By placing an LEP on the Moderators' list up to one year before it is in vacancy, Synods can avoid the sense that another denomination needs to provide ministry before the URC has had an opportunity to issue a call.

### **5.2 Shared Ministry**

5.2.1 By local arrangement, with the support of ecumenical officers, Synods and their ecumenical equivalent bodies, churches of different denominations, often including one or more LEP, can be grouped together using shared ministry in an ecumenical area or pastorate arrangements. Such groups will share ministers between the churches, provided that there is a common understanding of who will do what. Any agreement will, among other things, need to provide for what will happen when a minister from one of the churches leaves to ensure that new ministers continue to support and develop the Partnership.

5.2.2 Many existing LEP constitutions are drawn up on the basis of alternating ministry. It was expected that, if an LEP had been served by a minister of one denomination for a period, when that minister moved on, their replacement would be from one of the other denomination(s) in the LEP. As already noted, many Synods have instead asked the other denomination(s) to continue to provide ministry. This fails to recognise that all the traditional LEP denominations are struggling to offer ministry, with reducing numbers of ministers available amongst our ecumenical partners.

5.2.3 One option therefore is to move to a model of shared ministry where an LEP could be served by ministers of all the participating denominations in the LEP, but on a reduced scoping. This would provide consistent links to the parent denominations of the LEP and acknowledges that there is a reduction in the number of ministers in the URC and its ecumenical partners alike.

### **5.3 Synod-employed ecumenical officers and/or ecumenical enablers**

5.3.1 The URC has a network of highly experienced and committed Synod Ecumenical Officers. Some of these are fully or part-scoped in paid posts, while others volunteer to perform this role.

- 5.3.2 Many of the ecumenical officers, particularly who are serving in a voluntary capacity, feel stretched and unable to perform more than a fire-fighting role. Most see lost opportunities and potential for supporting ecumenical initiatives and developing stronger relationships with ecumenical partners. It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit volunteer ecumenical officers within the Synods.
- 5.3.3 Mission Committee is developing job descriptions for two distinct, employed Synod roles: ecumenical officer and ecumenical enabler. The former would be the familiar existing Synod role of advisor and representative. The latter would seek to initiate and encourage new ways of ecumenical working across the Synod.
- 5.3.4 Neither role need to be limited to Ministers of Word and Sacraments. They would equally suit an experienced lay person. Whilst it is a substantial commitment of resource to recruit for these roles using paid posts, the impact on mission is considerable. It also reduces the volume of queries which often end up on Moderators' desks.
- 5.3.5 Clearly, this depends on Synod resources although, if adopted as a successful model, there may be opportunity for support from the Synod sharing scheme.

### **6. Use of A flexible framework for local unity**

- 6.1 GA2022 passed Resolution 16c) that affirmed the use of the Churches Together in England document, A Flexible Framework for Local Unity. We have already seen examples of this document being used to great effect, and a training opportunity is scheduled for autumn 2023 to further encourage EOs and Moderators in its use.
- 6.2 As highlighted in the 2022 Report, although the document was developed by Churches Together in England and its member churches, it provides a model that can be applied beyond the English borders. It has even been shared as a model with a partner church in Jamaica.

### **7. Pilot schemes**

- 7.1 Currently, Northern Synod is undertaking a trial with the South-East Northumberland Ecumenical Area (SENEA). Instead of a constitutional arrangement with its incumbent administrative complexity, they are moving to one of the flexible framework arrangements, namely a partnership agreement. This will give greater freedom to concentrate on mission.
- 7.2 North Western Synod has had recent consultation with Methodist Districts within its boundaries to see how their Missional Partnerships can map more closely with Methodist Circuits and the shared ministry model suggested earlier in this report. One important aspect which came from these conversations was the importance of regular communication about ministry and mission. In addition, there was a recognition on behalf of our Methodist friends that several of our URC ministers were already scoped for LEPs and should therefore be recognised as Authorised Presbyters in the Methodist Church.

### **8. Summary**

- 8.1 In addition to the steps highlighted here that we, as the URC, can take, we continue to work with our ecumenical partners to better understand one another's polity and process. There have been some very open and frank conversations, for example about mutual recognition and the distinctiveness of our call process and

of eldership. In continuing to raise these issues and appreciate one another's perspectives, we hope to grow ever closer in our walk together as missional churches.

- 8.2 There is much joy to be seen in ecumenical partnerships that are working well. While still in our 50th anniversary year, it is the aim of these resolutions to General Assembly to offer some practical steps to resource and reinvigorate our ecumenical vision, honouring the commitment to ecumenism which brought us into being in 1972.

# Appendix

## APPLICATION FORM FOR AN ECUMENICAL POST

Please fill out the details below

<b>1.</b>	<b>THE PASTORATE/LOCAL ECUMENICAL CONTEXT</b>
Full name of the pastorate or local ecumenical context	
Scoping percentage	
Do you understand this is a 7 year post?	
Name and contact details of the main applicant	
<b>2.</b>	<b>CONTEXT</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>CENTRAL CONVICTION</b>
Describe the mission and/or ministry context	
Are there exceptional circumstances why this <b>post</b> should receive ecumenical accreditation?	
Does this post have the support of ecumenical partners?	
Please attach a letter of support from the ecumenical lead(s) of partner denominations	
How will the ministry develop?	
How will you monitor and evaluate the post in order to develop it?	
<b>4.</b>	<b>RELATIONSHIP WITH THE URC</b>
What time, if any, is allocated to the Synod/URC?	



<b>5.</b>	<b>STAFFING</b>
Role Description	
Person Specification	
<b>6.</b>	<b>FINANCE</b>
Please describe the financial arrangements for the post	
<b>7.</b>	<b>REVIEW AND REPORT</b>
Please describe the process for the annual review and report which should be sent to the Ministries Office.	
<b>8.</b>	<b>ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION</b>
Is there any additional information to support your application?	

Once all the questions have been answered and this form has been completed in full, please return it to Nicola Furley-Smith, The United Reformed Church, 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT or to [nicola.furley-smith@urc.org.uk](mailto:nicola.furley-smith@urc.org.uk)

Thank you.