

# Paper N1

## Church Life Review GA 2023 report

### General Secretary/Church Life Review

#### Basic information

Contact name and email address	John Bradbury, General Secretary John.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p><b>Resolution 43</b> General Assembly commends the five reflections on the theology of money to the whole United Reformed Church and its associated Charities and Trust Companies for prayer, reflection, and study.</p> <p><b>Resolution 44</b> General Assembly Commends the Theos report: <i>The United Reformed Church: A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads</i> to local churches and Synods for prayer, study, and reflection.</p> <p><b>Resolution 45</b> General Assembly commends to Synods and local churches the resource <i>Flourishing Churches</i> for prayer, study, reflection and action.</p> <p><b>Resolution 46</b> General Assembly affirms the vital role of Synods in connecting, affirming, and resourcing local churches.</p> <p><b>Resolution 47</b> General Assembly adopts the following Values and Principles as the basis for future decision making concerning the use and sharing of financial resources across Synods and the General Assembly:</p> <p>Values:</p> <p>a) As the United Reformed Church, we value conciliar decision making where we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• listen to each other, and the urgings of the Holy Spirit</li><li>• act with humility</li><li>• act with grace and generosity</li><li>• seek to consider the good of all God's people, fostering obedience to the Gospel and furthering justice and climate care, rather than narrow self-interest.</li></ul>

- b) We believe that transparency about our decision making helps us be accountable to each other, and to God, whose mission we seek to serve.
- c) We will use the charitable funds at our disposal lawfully and ensure the activity carried out with them is compliant.

#### Principles:

- a) We seek to use our resources *effectively*, and not just where some of us might shout loudly or on sustaining existing ways of being.
- b) We look to be *efficient*, as part of our commitment to good stewardship.
- c) We will take *considered risks* for the Kingdom.
- d) We prioritise *partnership* within and beyond the United Reformed Church.
- e) We value local *diversity* within the family of the United Reformed Church, rather than constraining uniformity.

#### Resolution 48

General Assembly believes God is calling us to financial resource sharing across the United Reformed Church in accordance with the values and principles it has adopted. It empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to appoint a task group to:

- a) Develop a range of different models of resource sharing.
- b) To carry out detailed feasibility work for each model.
- c) To determine what structural or legal changes might be necessary to enable each model to function.
- d) To evaluate each model against the Values and Principles General Assembly has adopted.
- e) To report back to General Assembly 2024.

#### Resolution 49

General Assembly empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to set up a task group to explore ways in which, in accordance with the values and principles adopted, the wider Councils of the United Reformed Church might offer consistent,

	<p><b>locally accessible, support functions for local churches in areas including (but not exclusively):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• finance</li> <li>• property</li> <li>• health and safety</li> <li>• human resources</li> <li>• safeguarding.</li> </ul> <p>It asks the task group to bring a model, or models, to General Assembly 2024 with feasibility studies and costings.</p> <p><b>Resolution 50</b> General Assembly invites the General Secretariat and PLATO to re-establish the PLATO handbook (or equivalent), providing a central online resource of advice and pro-formas for trust, property, financial and related matters for local congregations, to be available on-line at the latest by General Assembly 2025.</p> <p><b>Resolution 51</b> General Assembly empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to set up a working group to examine:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) What models of employed lay work can be effective within local churches.</li> <li>b) What infrastructure is necessary to be provided by the wider church to support employed lay ministry in local churches.</li> <li>c) How mission and ministry which would lead to the emergence of new United Reformed Church communities of discipleship and worship might be encouraged and resourced.</li> </ol>
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## Summary of content

<p><b>Subject and aim(s)</b></p>	<p>The Church Life Review Group was asked by General Assembly 2021 to examine the structures, resources, and work of the United Reformed Church to enable us to respond faithfully to the challenges the church faces. Over the last two years, we have consulted widely across the Church, and commissioned work on the theology of money, the lived experiences of the United Reformed Church, the resources available to the United Reformed Church, and how we are using those resources.</p> <p>Our work has given each member of the group greater insight into the challenges and opportunities facing the United Reformed Church. In particular, we have been struck that we have more significant financial resources available to deploy</p>
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	<p>on the church's mission than many members of the church may realise. However, it is also true that those resources are not available uniformly across the church, but concentrated in particular areas, in part as a result of wider economic trends.</p> <p>The Church Life Review Group is clear that those resources should neither be deployed against some centrally directed strategy, nor simply used to subsidise existing activities. Rather, we see the church as facing a <i>Kairos</i> moment where it has an opportunity to try different ways of being the church and bring new energy to its mission.</p>
<b>Main points</b>	<p>To that end, we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commend the resources developed and commissioned by the Church Life Review Group to the church (Theological reflections, Theos, flourishing churches etc).</li> <li>• Invite General Assembly to affirm some of the key messages we have discerned from the wider church (purpose of wider church structures, values, principles etc).</li> <li>• Recommend that General Assembly:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ commissions work on effective resource-sharing across the church;</li> <li>○ establishes work to create centres of expertise within the church, avoiding duplication, and making expertise more widely available to Synods and local churches;</li> <li>○ creates a working group on new models of lay work in local churches and groups of churches; and</li> <li>○ authorises effective, proportionate project management of this work for the benefit of the wider Church.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	<p>N2 – AE Paper 2021            N1 – AE paper 2022            N1 – GA paper 2022.</p>
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	<p>Synod Moderators, Synod Clerks, Synod Treasurers, Synod Trust Convenors, Synod Trust Officers, Synod Property Officers, Convenor of URC Trust, Finance Committee and General Secretariat.</p>

## Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	The Finance Committee has identified sources of funding to support further work agreed. See finance resolution G5.
<b>External (eg ecumenical)</b>	N/A.

## 1. Planting gardens

- 1.1. “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:5-7).
- 1.2. The letter the prophet Jeremiah writes to the exiles from Jerusalem who find themselves transplanted into Babylon is remarkable. The People of God have been uprooted from everything they know and from so much that formed their very identity, and find themselves in a context where nothing seems recognisable. There are limits to any analogy, but the Church in Western Europe finds itself transplanted into a world that many of us barely recognise. We can plot the graphs of our numerical decline, and lament the loss of our place within society. We can decry secularisation and live in secret fear of becoming irrelevant. However, if we hear the words of the prophet to one set of exiles as words to us, we find ourselves reorientated.
- 1.3. The exiles are told to do some remarkably simple things. Things which in the context must have felt difficult. They are told to plant gardens, build houses, form relationships, and seek the good of the place that is now their home – a place one might have expected them to think of as “the enemy”. They are not to look back and lament the wondrous gardens they once had, but to plant a seed, that in time, once more, there will be a garden. Garden planting starts with that simple act of hope which is to plant a seed. It may sprout, it may not. It will need watering and tending and caring. We don’t know what will happen when we plant a seed. Nothing may happen. But without planting that seed there is no hope.
- 1.4. This letter to the exiles, rather unexpectedly, has become the key biblical text for the Church Life Review. The General Secretary chose it early in the process as the basis for reflections to a couple of Synod meetings. Entirely coincidentally, Fiona Bennett, the current Moderator of General Assembly, chose it to focus our Bible study and worship as we met in consultation with Synod Moderators and representatives of Synods. We also find resonances in the report from *Theos*. Just as planting a seed can be the first step on the way to a garden, we find that small churches can make a significant difference to the communities around them. The innate charism of the United Reformed Church locally to serve the local communities in which we find ourselves is us responding to the call to seek the welfare of the places in which God has set us. We may no longer recognise those places in many ways, given the rapid pace of societal change, but our vocation remains to seek the welfare of the places God has set us.
- 1.5. The Church Life Review Group has learnt much on the journey that brought it from an initial resolution to bring such a group into being at General Assembly 2021. By the time the group had been formed and was able to meet in person for the first time, to the point at which this report has had to be submitted has been less than 18 months. We realise that as this phase of our work concludes, and this group stands down, we have done little more than set us off on a journey. That will frustrate some who want immediate answers to pressing problems.

Others have struggled with the pace that we have set. Our prayer is that we have planted seeds, and provided resources to the wider church that might nourish the work that will follow as the garden is tended.

- 1.6.** We were convinced from the outset that providing a grand plan for the United Reformed Church – some kind of church-wide mission strategy – was to misunderstand both our real need and to misunderstand what can really make a difference to our life in local churches. We remain convinced that the primary place for the discerning of God’s vocation to the life of the Church remains the local Church and Elders meetings. There are some who are frustrated with that, and who struggle to see how, without a clear denominational vision, we can set priorities and use resources effectively.

We believe, as a result of much prayer, worship, discernment, consultation and information gathering, that key to the flourishing of the United Reformed Church is to resource as effectively as we can our local churches, and other frontlines of mission. It is for local churches to utilise those resources in service of the vision they have caught for their life together in their context. We will invite General Assembly to affirm that the primary strategic purpose of the wider Councils of the United Reformed Church is to serve the flourishing of local churches and only to undertake such work that furthers the gospel and flourishing of the whole body that cannot be undertaken by the local church.

- 1.7.** The conciliar nature of the United Reformed Church leads us to understand that strategy cannot emerge top-down, rather it emerges as we engage together. We have learned the vital importance of first-class facilitation for that to happen. We experienced this as Fiona Bennett facilitated our consultation with Synod Moderators, and as Andrea Russell and Gordon Woods facilitated the Yarnfield consultation which brought together those from across the Synods and General Assembly with responsibility for finance, trust matters, property and the like. Expert facilitation allows all voices to be heard, and principles, aims, aspirations and potential actions to be discerned and refined. That facilitation enables the Church to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit in the voices of one another. We believe that bringing people together for extensive consultation has been invaluable, and will continue to be invaluable, even though it has a cost to it. Engaging difficult issues requires the trust that emerges out of real human interaction. This is when imaginations begin to fire collectively in the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe these ways of working have proved invaluable, and will need to be part of the ongoing next phase of work.
- 1.8.** We have learned of the vital contribution that those with expertise beyond the life of the United Reformed Church can bring us. The attentive listening that *Theos* has done for us has given us the opportunity to see ourselves as others see us. An outside listening ear, without an axe to grind, provides valuable space for people to reflect. Similarly, the expertise that MKS have brought us as we’ve attempted to examine our financial situation has been invaluable. It has enabled us to tell the story of the United Reformed Church in numbers. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21).

- 1.9.** We have learned that the kind of work we have been doing needs to be well resourced. This Church Life Review process was set off without any additional staffing capacity being added to resource its work. In the period of our work, there have been a number of unexpected Church House staff absences or changes of



personnel. The General Secretary ended up being signed off work for a few weeks – which is maybe not entirely unrelated to these issues of capacity. We offer huge thanks to Lindsey Sanderson and Gordon Woods who stepped up to the plate to convene and act as secretary of our work. The lack of capacity to enable our work has had implications. Consultation has not always been what we would have hoped with regard to the review of structures. Balls have been dropped. Pieces of work have been later than anticipated. Where we have failed, we offer our apologies. We also would recommend to the Church that for future work as we move forward, it is vital that it is properly resourced in terms of staffing. Processes that are not well handled and administered run the risk of losing trust, not building trust, and making errors, simple or profound, that might not be made otherwise.

- 1.10.** We have learned that there is a very serious lack of trust within the United Reformed Church. Some of us knew this coming into the work, but it has also been demonstrated in some of what *Theos* have found in their report. There is too often suspicion of Synods by local churches, and suspicion of the General Assembly by local churches and Synods, and suspicion of Church House by absolutely everybody! Our experience has been that there is a tendency amongst us to think the worst first, to presume that there is a hidden agenda, to assume that “they” are out to “do us down” somehow. We simply do not believe that this is true.

We have engaged with a huge variety of people from across the whole United Reformed Church and find faithful people working tirelessly for the good of the life of the Church and the world. We believe that building trust must be one of the key objectives we have as a church. There is, at times, no replacement for meeting together in person. Bringing people from differing perspectives and different vantage points in the life of the church around one table is always a transformative experience.

- 1.11.** We have learned that there is a sense that very few people within the life of the United Reformed Church believe that they have the necessary agency to effect change. Change should either be initiated from “them”, and “they” are not doing it, or change that is desired is being blocked by “them” over there. Having brought together in one room Synod Moderators, Synod Treasurers, Synod Trust Company Convenors and Trust officers, Synod Clerks, members of the Church Life Review Group, and members of Church House staff it was remarkable to hear our ecumenical facilitator reflect back to us that she was hearing a significant sense that ‘we’ have not got the ability to effect change, and a sense that there is some kind of ‘they’ that might stop it.

Discovering a healthy sense of having the agency and authority to begin to effect change is vital to our health as the body of Christ. We, together, the United Reformed Church, as those who make up its Councils, from the Church Meeting to the General Assembly, do have the ability to effect change and make things happen. We are, perhaps, too wary of taking hold of what conciliar church government says really is ours to grasp.

- 1.12.** We have prayed, studied scripture together, worshipped together – and done all those things with many others. We have heard of remarkable things that the United Reformed Church is doing, and it has been a privilege. As this configuration of Church Life Review Group stands down having brought us to

General Assembly 2023, we want to thank you for the remarkable opportunity that you have given us to see so much that is good in the life of the United Reformed Church.

## 2. Where we have come from

- 2.1. In November 2022 we reported to Mission Council on our progress to date. At that point, we were to some extent in something of a limbo position. We were waiting on major consultations with Synod Moderators and about finance and trust matters, and on the Theos report. We were in the process of consulting further on changes to committee structures, and reported on the consultation feedback at that point. This General Assembly report is the first time we have the substantive material for detailed discussion to follow.
- 2.2. We have come to realise that it is vital to understand that there have been various significant attempts to grapple with serious issues that have faced the United Reformed Church for many years. We can think back to the 'Growing Up Report', the 'Patterns of Ministry Report', the 'Catch the Vision', the 'Medium Term Strategy Report', and the review of Synods and Synod Moderators. Fruit has been harvested from many of these initiatives, perhaps most radically in the changes which flowed from 'Catch the Vision'. However, we have also often heard of the regret that many of the key recommendations of the 'Patterns of Ministry' report were not adopted. Many of the issues that we have been identifying were identified and constructive suggestions made to engage them in the 'Medium Term Strategy' report. We have a history of setting groups of people up, asking them to address significant and difficult issues, bringing radical proposals to General Assembly only for them to be rejected, and to find ourselves a few years later staring at the same problems and at times regretting not having tackled them more boldly earlier.
- 2.3. In the light of the above, we are not bringing a set of resolutions to effect radical change. That is not realistic in the timescale to which we have been working, and neither do we believe it is the most helpful way to effect change. Rather, the recommendations we bring seek to define some basic principles we may discern as guiding future work and decision making, seeking to identify some key aspirations that we believe if followed through with would make a significant difference to the ability of United Reformed Churches to flourish, and to set off further detailed work exploring the feasibility of possible options.
- 2.4. What is radically new in the work we have done is the attempt to engage the question of money. How are we called to use the financial resources we have is a theological question, and one that the United Reformed Church has not examined previously. It is perhaps telling that when we looked at past General Assembly Resolutions about money, we notice that we have frequently taken positions on how other people ought to use money, but rarely considered how we are called to use the money we have as a Church. There are exceptions to this in terms of ethical investment policies, but we have never thought seriously about the theological groundwork for the way in which we take budgetary decisions.
- 2.5. If we were to simplify to the absolute core the key question that we have been seeking to address it would be: **What enables local United Reformed Churches to flourish, and how might the United Reformed Church most effectively use the financial resources it has to enable that flourishing?** Our work has obviously involved reflection on other matters, such as structures.



But we believe that this is the key question that the Church needs to continue to try to answer if we are to respond faithfully to the call to plant gardens and seek the welfare of the place God has put us.

### 3. What have we done

- 3.1 **Theos research:** At the outset, we recognised the vital importance of hearing the voices of local United Reformed Churches as carefully as possible. We have engaged in a variety of exercises seeking feedback, including the 'Jubilee Questions' around a Jubilee Daily Devotions service, feedback from various discussion sessions at General Assembly and Assembly Executive, as well as examining all individual contributions that were made. At the heart of our attempt to do careful listening to the reality of United Reformed Church life was the work we engaged in with the think-tank Theos. We partnered with them (meaning that the work is of use in furthering their charitable objectives in terms of the understanding of the impact of faith communities in the public square as well as our objectives as the United Reformed Church) in a piece of research work whose primary aim was to examine what flourishing looks like within the United Reformed Church, and what supports that flourishing.

A set of ten case studies were developed, seven reflecting a range of different local pastorate contexts, attempting to gain a spread of demographic contexts. One case study was of URC Youth as a representation of an activity of the whole United Reformed Church across all the different councils of the Church. Two case studies were of Synods so it was possible to gain an insight into the similarities and differences between how local churches and Synod understand the issues at stake. The full report is available at on the main webpage for General Assembly papers: [www.urb.org.uk/general-assembly](http://www.urb.org.uk/general-assembly)

- 3.2 **Theology of Money:** We commissioned a series of theological reflections from people with differing perspectives on the theology of money. This was to provide material for the whole church to think about and spark conversation around questions to do with how, theologically, we are called to use the financial resources we have available to us. The reflections are available here: [www.urb.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/small-group-studies/](http://www.urb.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/small-group-studies/)

- 3.3 **MKS Forensic Accounting:** We commissioned a piece of forensic accounting from MKS, who have a specialist charities accounting unit. The aim was to map the financial resources of the United Reformed Church across the 14 legal entities that hold them on behalf of the General Assembly and the 13 Synods. From an initial model spreadsheet, representatives of all Synods were invited to workshops to refine the model and ensure it would capture the information required and in ways manageable. The 14 Trusts were then invited to respond to this. The hope had been to gain three years' worth of data to map historical changes. In reality, it was only possible to gain high enough quality data to map one year: 2021. This gives us the first overall view of the income and expenditure of those 14 interrelating entities. The full report is available in report N3.

- 3.4 **Flourishing churches:** Aware that many churches are struggling to manage particularly with the lack of people able to take on positions of responsibility, and aware of the sheer numbers of churches who feel they may be close to closure, we engaged with a piece of work designed to enable churches to discern the ways in which they might be able to meet the basic requirements of being a church, and beyond that to flourish. As the Theos report indicates, there are a

range of possibilities for supporting partnerships of congregations which have not been significantly engaged with. This paper seeks to help local churches recognise what key elements of church life are vital for flourishing and offers a range of ways forward that might offer new life. The full version of this resources is in the Book of Reports at N4.

- 3.5 **General Assembly Committee structure:** We have engaged in a process of reconsidering the structures of the General Assembly. There is universal agreement that we need smaller, more compact structures, that require far fewer people to fill them. This part of our work, more than most, suffered from a lack of capacity to move forward consultation in the ways hoped. An interim report was issued at Assembly Executive 2022, but the further hoped for consultation has been lacking. We bring therefore reduced proposals regarding structures but wish to test the mind of Assembly on moving forward with aspects that seem to have met with widespread agreement and to set off a process to continue this work and bring it to completion. These proposals are contained in an appendix to this main report.
- 3.6 **Consultations:** We sought to consult with the wider Church through 'Jubilee Questions' that were linked with the Jubilee Daily Devotions service in October 2022. More specifically, aware of the unparalleled oversight that the Moderators meeting has of the whole United Reformed Church we met with the Moderators meeting for a 48-hour consultation facilitated by the Moderator of General Assembly, the Revd Fiona Bennett. We were also very aware that the process of thinking through questions surrounding the resourcing of local churches at the level of finances, and dealing with the compliance challenges that face us, was something that requires joined-up thinking from across the 14 legal entities that make up the wider URC.

For the first time in the history of the United Reformed Church, we brought together the Convenors of all the Trust Companies which hold our assets (it is telling that Church House did not even know who all these people were at the start of this project), Synod Treasurers, Synod Trust Officers, Synod Clerks, Synod Moderators along with people responsible for buildings, and General Assembly and Church House staff with relevant responsibilities. This was facilitated jointly by Revd Dr Andrea Russell, Warden of Gladstone's Library, and Gordon Woods from the Church Life Review Group. This consultation felt seminal in our work, and from it emerged the proposals for future work concerning resource sharing and supporting local churches with compliance matters that are below. The Councils of the Church remain the key place in which we discern together, and the place the authority for determining policy and taking action resides. We believe that bringing people together to consult as we have done has been of tremendous benefit in assisting the discernment process of the Assembly.

## 4. What we have found

- 4.1 **Reaffirming our values:** The United Reformed Church is a Church which believes that the mission and ministry of the church is best discerned by local congregations for their immediate contexts. The Theos research demonstrates the foundational importance of local decision-making for us, and the way we do that is valued by many. Our concern for the immediate local communities that we serve is also central to our identity. There is a strong feeling of being part of a family of the United Reformed Church, which is one of the metaphors with which

one can unpack what it means to be the Body of Christ and the People of God. Where one part of the family suffers, we all suffer. The gifts of the whole body are required for the flourishing of the whole body.

We believe that these values lead us to an understanding of what the strategic priorities of the wider Councils of the Church (Synods and General Assembly) must be, which is: **to serve the flourishing of local churches and only to undertake such work that furthers the gospel and flourishing of the whole body that cannot be undertaken by the local church.** We believe that the wider councils of the Church should only undertake such activity that is not directly about serving the local church when it is activity that local churches themselves cannot undertake alone. The Theos report illustrates this well: URC Youth provides discipleship and an experience of 'being church' for young people that most local churches cannot.

Another example might be the work of the Joint Public Issues Team which helps local churches have a voice in the public realm (together with ecumenical colleagues) that no local church alone could have. Equally, the wider councils of the church have duties to enable new local congregations to be initiated through missionary activity. When determining the priority for resources, however, serving the flourishing of local churches should be the number one priority.

- 4.2 **Naming our lived experience:** We believe that naming the joys and challenges of being Church today is vital. The Theos report gives many examples of flourishing, and there are many more besides. It also points to hard realities about being church in today's world. We do lament the loss of what we have been, and that sense of loss leads at times to bitterness and resentment, particularly if not named and owned. We need to develop a culture where we can be honest about our lived joys and sorrows, and name reality for what it is, even when that is difficult. This is what it is to speak the truth in love – sometimes the truths we face as a family are hard.
- 4.3 The Theos report finds many **signs of flourishing**, particularly in our work within local communities, around how we hold differences together, and the way we hold the voices of children and young people within the life of the church. We are a church of action and activity. We are also a tired church, perhaps. We struggle to place discipleship at the centre of our lives. Of all the voices Theos heard, there was very little they heard about worship, spirituality or discipleship, despite discipleship being a key focus of our work over the last few years.
- 4.4 There is a very strong sense around the life of the United Reformed Church that **our existing structures are failing us.** They are too top-heavy, too extensive, and need to be sleeker, and slimmer. We bring initial proposals for beginning changes to our structures in an appendix to this report.
- 4.5 There is also a strong sense that **people are tired and ground down by what feels like a scarcity of Ministers of Word and Sacraments and Elders.** Whilst the number of ministers per member may remain static, the number of congregations per minister is becoming frightening as we contemplate a statistical future with over seven congregations per stipendiary minister within a decade. We have not ever been in the position where we limit the number of candidates for ministerial training we can accept on financial grounds. We are once again accepting several ministers on certificates of eligibility each year.

- 4.6 **What is experienced as the shortage of stipendiary ministers cannot be addressed by simply ordaining more stipendiary ministers.** There are not large numbers of people coming forward to candidate for ministry (and we need to be realistic about the pool of suitable people who might receive a vocation given the demographic of the overwhelming proportion of the URC), and there is a limit to the number of certificates of eligibility the M&M fund can sustain. This does not mean the issue cannot be addressed, there are various things we can do, but many of them have resource implications. We can do the following.
- 4.1.1. Begin to **think in the round about ministry beyond stipendiary target figures.** How can we proactively address deployment as being about stipendiary, non-stipendiary (models 1-3 and 4) ministers and CRCWs, Lay Preachers, Lay Pioneers and Elders? One precious resource within the Church is our Lay Preachers. Often, however, at the end of training and commissioning they function entirely 'freelance', in an essentially open-market bidding system where pulpit supply secretaries try to get in early enough to book a lay preacher whilst they are still free. We believe that moving towards an understanding of Lay Preaching as a resource that can be part of the deployed ministry within a pastorate or grouping of local congregations would be a helpful direction of travel.
- 4.1.2. Alongside recognised ministries of the Church **employed lay staff need to become a greater part of the ministry mixture.** Youth and Children's Workers, Pastoral Assistants, Community workers and the like are all employed positions that can add massive value to the ministry and mission of a local congregation. However, staff require infrastructure: payrolls, line-management, disciplinary and other appropriate policies in place, support, or reference groups etc. These are currently beyond the ability of some local congregations to provide and within our current structures can be a significant challenge for Synods to deliver. Such support for employing staff to assist in our work locally could be provided, however, if the resources to do that were available. This would also help us become a better and more consistent employer ensuring best employment practice is followed.
- 4.1.3. It is vital that we release all the ministry resource we have, from all the variety of vocations we find within the URC, to engage with the heart of ministry. All too often, Ministers, CRCWs, Elders and Lay Preachers are ground down by an array of administrative tasks to ensure that the myriad compliance requirements on several local churches are met. One significant way to **free up ministerial resource** of all varieties would be to ensure that congregations have administrative support for the management of finances, buildings, compliance and the like. Again, this requires infrastructure that currently is largely beyond the ability of our structures to deliver.
- 4.7 **The Theos report** makes clear the value that Church Related Community Workers bring to the life of the United Reformed Church. We were surprised at the extent to which this emerges within the report, given there are only 13 CRCWs. There is a resource here, and learning, from which the whole United Reformed Church might better benefit, given how central community ministry is to our identity. The report also highlights that there are at times issues in the functioning of CRCW projects and their integration within the life of the church.

We believe that the Church would benefit from the Ministries Committee initiating a review into CRCW ministry and the support of community work across the

Church, to explore what learning there is for the wider Church, how presenting issues might be addressed, and to explore how a greater part of the URC might benefit from this form of ministry.

- 4.8 The results of **the forensic accounting** show a mixed picture across the financial life of the United Reformed Church. These are available in paper N2. In short, across the 14 legal entities that hold the financial resources of the wider church, we spend more each year than we get in general income. We subsidise our day-to-day living by selling redundant church buildings and through the gains on investments (which go down as well as up). However, the overall trajectory is that our financial wealth is increasing relatively rapidly because of the sale of redundant buildings. This is in stark contrast to the decline in membership and the closure of congregations. The cruel irony is that decline of church life results in an increase in financial resources. How are we called to use those financial resources in a theologically appropriate way in response to the call of God?
- 4.9 What is also clear, though hardly new knowledge, is that **the financial resources of the church are deeply unequally spread across the 14 legal entities which hold them**. Inter-Synod resource sharing is very limited in what it achieves, which is in effect to ensure that the Synods of Scotland and Wales are able to function at a realistic level on a year-to-year basis.
- 4.10 It is also clear that the **support services that can be offered to local churches vary considerably from Synod to Synod**. No Synod can offer comprehensive support in terms of finance, buildings, human resources, safeguarding and the like. For many churches, much more focused support of this nature would make the difference between them being able to engage meaningfully in their mission and ministry within their local communities, and simply keeping going.

Even the Church-wide resources that once we had, such as the PLATO handbook, have become unsustainable. The PLATO handbook sought to bring together up to date and reliable advice and proformas on a range of different practical matters for local churches. The Trust Officers found they were lacking the capacity to keep its content up to date, and out of date content can be even more unhelpful than no content, so the resource was withdrawn. This leaves us in a situation where often advice on items such as legal matters end up being taken multiple times over by the 14 different legal entities, at considerable cost, and with the danger that the advice given is inconsistent and leads to potential problems defending legal cases as they arise.

- 4.11 The United Reformed Church was for a long time rich in extraordinary volunteers who gifted time, and often considerable expertise to Church life. However, it was not a Church that ever thought of itself as rich. We now find ourselves in an era where we are people-poor, but increasingly cash-rich. This entails a change of mindset. All members of the URC are aware of the drastic changes that we are living through, and the challenges that entails.

We believe that this is something of a ***Kairos* moment: a moment the Spirit offers us**, which can be grasped, but equally could slip through our fingers. We believe we have sufficient human resource to engage in a process of quite radical change that would release the resources of the church for local mission and ministry. The *Kairos* moment will not last forever – there is a strong sense that unless we grasp this moment, we may be too late. The fear of many is that



we die an extremely rich church when there is the possibility of stewarding our resources such that new life can flourish, ministry freed for its true purpose, and seeds planted to ensure future generations have gardens from which to eat.

## 5. Planting seeds

5.1. Even before a garden is planted, seeds need to be planted. Planting seeds is an act of faith. One is never quite sure what will happen, and some will not flourish. Others may grow wildly at first but have little longevity, some may turn into weeds that later need weeding, but some will form the basis of the gardens of the future. We offer the following suggestions for the next stages of the work.

### 5.2. **Resolution 43: General Assembly commends the five reflections on the theology of money to the whole United Reformed Church and its associated Charities and Trust Companies for prayer, reflection, and study.**

5.2.1. These reflections have been helpfully turned into resources as part of the 'Daily Devotions' resources. All councils of the Church and their associated charities and Trust Companies take decisions on how we use money, and we believe that careful consideration of the theological principles which underlie our use of money will enrich our life together.

### 5.3. **Resolution 44: General Assembly Commends the Theos Report: *The United Reformed Church: A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads* to local churches and Synods for prayer, study and reflection.**

5.3.1. We believe that this report will provide rich resources to local congregations and Synods to enable reflection on our ministry and mission.

### 5.4. **Resolution 45: General Assembly commends to Synods and local churches the resource *Flourishing Churches*.**

5.4.1. This resource explores what some of the key aspects of church life are that are vital to the existence of the life of the church and its flourishing. Recognising how many local churches struggle to find the human resource necessary to undertake that work, this resource sets out different forms of church life that might reduce and share the burdens. It also recognises that there are elements that must be present for church life to be safe and recognises that the moment does come when a church cannot continue because those elements are not present. There are many possible avenues to explore before that place is reached, and this resource will help local congregations and Synods explore the possibilities in different contexts.

### 5.5. **General Assembly believes that the primary strategic aim of the work of the General Assembly and Synods is to serve the flourishing of local churches and only to undertake such work that furthers the gospel that cannot be undertaken by the local church.**

5.5.1. We believe that it will be helpful to state this aim, so that it is kept in view. It does not preclude other valuable work where the church can only exercise part of its ministry and mission within the wider Councils of the Church. It also does not preclude the initiating of new forms of mission and ministry. It should act as a guide for the use of resources, however, to ensure that the primacy of the local as



the place where mission and ministry is exercised is shaping all our decision-making processes.

## **5.6. Resolution 46: General Assembly affirms the vital role of Synods in connecting, affirming and resourcing local churches.**

- 5.6.1. Synods often find themselves uncomfortably caught between local churches and the General Assembly. We believe they are a vital way in which the interconnectedness of the body of Christ is maintained. It is easy to hear calls to share resources more widely as undermining the work of individual Synods. Synods, as the primary Council of oversight play a significant part in the flourishing of the United Reformed Church and that should be celebrated. At the same time, it is helpful to recall that Synods, as a Council of the Church, are not identical to the charitable trust companies which hold the resources of Synods. This resolution makes clear that future discussion which theoretically may result in suggesting changes to Trust structures (and equally may not), in no way undermines the vital role that Synods themselves play fulfilling the functions ascribed to them in the *Structure* of the United Reformed Church.

We also noted that with the abolition of District Councils, work that might have been done at that level has now reverted largely to Synods, with a particular increase in demands on Synod Moderators. We do not believe that merging Synods would be a helpful approach, because they can already feel distant from the local church.

## **5.7. Resolution 47: General Assembly adopts the following *Values and Principles* as the basis for future decision making concerning the use and sharing of financial resources across Synods and the General Assembly:**

### **Values:**

- a) **As the United Reformed Church, we value conciliar decision making where we:**
  - **listen to each other, and the urgings of the Holy Spirit;**
  - **act with humility;**
  - **act with grace and generosity; and**
  - **seek to consider the good of all God's people, fostering obedience to the Gospel and furthering justice and climate care, rather than narrow self-interest.**
- b) **We believe that transparency about our decision making helps us be accountable to each other, and to God, whose mission we seek to serve.**
- c) **We will use the charitable funds at our disposal lawfully and ensure the activity carried out with them is compliant.**

### **Principles:**

- a) **We seek to use our resources *effectively*, and not just where some of us might shout loudly or on sustaining existing ways of being.**
- b) **We look to be *efficient*, as part of our commitment to good stewardship.**
- c) **We will take *considered risks* for the Kingdom.**
- d) **We prioritise *partnership* within and beyond the United Reformed Church.**

- e) **We value local *diversity* within the family of the United Reformed Church, rather than constraining uniformity.**

5.7.1 These values and principles emerged from the consultation at Yarnfield. Initially we worked simply with the principles, but it was clear from reaction in the meeting that there was a strong desire to set specific principles in the wider context of our values. These values and principles were found helpful as a tool to evaluate different options for future ways of working. We believe that in setting these as the values and principles by which we will evaluate potential option for new ways of sharing resources and administering them, future Assemblies will be greatly assisted in their discernment.

**5.8 Resolution 48: General Assembly believes God is calling us to financial resource sharing across the United Reformed Church in accordance with the values and principles it has adopted. It empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to appoint a task group to:**

- a) **develop a range of different models of resource sharing**
- b) **carry out detailed feasibility work for each model**
- c) **determine what structural or legal changes might be necessary to enable each model to function**
- d) **evaluate each model against the Values and Principles General Assembly has adopted**
- e) **report back to General Assembly 2024.**

5.8.1 The consultation at Yarnfield explored briefly a range of different ways in which resource sharing might operate in the future. These ranged from an enhanced version of inter-synod resources sharing, through to the merger of all the legal entities which hold the financial resources of the United Reformed Church. Whilst there was a strong consensus that significant change was needed, positives and negatives were immediately spotted for each possible model. For General Assembly to discern wisely, it needs detailed feasibility studies on a range of different approaches.

**5.9 Resolution 49: General Assembly empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to set up a task group to explore ways in which, in accordance with the values and principles adopted, the wider Councils of the United Reformed Church might offer consistent, locally accessible, support functions for local churches in areas including (but not exclusively):**

- **finance**
- **property**
- **health and safety**
- **human resources**
- **safeguarding.**

**It asks the task group to bring a model, or models, to General Assembly 2024 with feasibility studies and costings.**

5.9.1 We believe that central to releasing the maximum potential from ministerial resources (lay and ordained ministries) is to ensure that the gifts and graces people bring to the life of the church can be released for mission and ministry, not

tied up in attending to necessary and important, but time consuming, compliance matters. We believe that, working together, and sharing our resources in new ways, it would be possible to offer resources, locally accessible, to congregations. This resolution invites feasibility work into this.

This emerges out of reflection at Yarnfield, where it was clear there was appetite to achieve common standards in compliance areas to maximise support to congregations and minimise risk. There was also a desire to explore how this might best be achieved, including through the possible development of 'centres of expertise' rooted in Synods but serving the wider church. The resolution recognises there are a range of models that potentially could be explored, so does not limit the task group to just this model.

**5.10 Resolution 50: General Assembly invites the General Secretariat and PLATO to re-establish the PLATO handbook (or equivalent), providing a central on-line resource of advice and pro-formas for trust, property, financial and related matters for local congregations, to be available on-line at the latest by General Assembly 2025.**

5.10.1 One clear and relatively achievable outcome of the Yarnfield consultation was a desire to reinstate something equivalent to the former PLATO handbook. This will need resourcing, but the presence of a Compliance Officer at Church House goes some way to enabling this. This could potentially significantly reduce developing the same pieces of work multiple times over, and provide an easy one-stop shop for local churches furnishing them with written advice and pro-formas that can be adopted for local usage.

**5.11 Resolution 51: General Assembly empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to set up a working group to examine:**

- a) **What models of employed lay work can be effective within local churches.**
- b) **What infrastructure is necessary to be provided by the wider church to support employed lay ministry in local churches.**
- c) **How mission and ministry which would lead to the emergence of new United Reformed Church communities of discipleship and worship might be encouraged and resourced.**

**5.12 Financing future work**

5.12.1 It is not possible at this point in the development of further work to bring detailed cost proposals for the capacity that will be necessary to develop the next stage of work of the Church Life Review. It is only as task groups begin their work that it will become clear what capacity, either in terms of staff time or consultancy, will be necessary to complete work well. We do not wish to bind the hands of those who will undertake the work, but we are convinced that there is not the resource within existing capacity to complete it well.

The Finance Committee has considered this report and the work the Assembly would be initiating if these resolutions are passed. It has agreed to redesignate the Annenberg Fund to enable it to be spent on necessary professional advice, consultancy or temporary employees to enable this work to be forwarded in a

timely fashion. The Finance Committee are also bringing paper G5, which sets out to repurpose a proportion of the funds that have accumulated in the Legacy fund to assist with the funding of the work. The Finance Committee and the Trust will ensure appropriate oversight and governance of expenditure.

**6.** We conclude with a prayer.

God who gardens,  
who enjoys the land and declares it to be good,  
who revels in its diversity and delights in its abundance,  
who invites us to share in the task of nurturing and cherishing the gardens of our  
lives and our churches,  
we ask for energy and wisdom as we tend the land.

Where the garden is overgrown,  
give us insight into what should be cleared away and what should be nurtured;  
Where the garden is tired,  
fill us with courage to prune back branches to allow new growth to emerge;  
Where the garden is barren,  
encourage us to plant seeds with hope and trust, even if we may not see the tree  
fully mature;  
Where the garden is desolate,  
may we provide nesting boxes and bug hotels to encourage and foster new life;  
Where the garden needs feeding,  
help us to get the right balance of food and water, sunshine and shade  
Where the garden is flourishing  
may we cherish its life and invite others to sit in its shade.

God who gardens,  
as we co-create with you,  
may we also enjoy the land and declare it to be good,  
revel in its diversity and delight in its abundance.  
Amen.