

Paper X2

YoURChurch

North Western Synod

Basic information

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Action required	
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 72 General Assembly receives the online congregation YoURChurch as a local church of the URC, and commits to continuing further work on the issues of Church Membership.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To enable YoURChurch to become a recognised church in its own right, with the relevant governance, commitments and potential of any other United Reformed Church.
Main points	
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	The Faith and Order Committee, The Synod Clerk.

Summary of impact

Financial	There will be a positive impact, as the new church will contribute to the Maintenance of the Ministry fund.
External (eg ecumenical)	Ecumenical partners are aware of yoURChurch and have shown interest because they are looking at similar initiatives.

Preface

yourchurch began in August 2020 when the group that had been meeting weekly on Zoom as a way of continuing to worship through the first lockdown elected to keep doing so and form an intentional online congregation. They had discovered that meeting in this way had become more than a means of survival until “normal service could be resumed”: it was a different way of being church and one which fed them in a unique way.

Two factors were at play here: one was the opportunities afforded by the digital space; the second was the very deliberate focus on discipleship and mission – the connection between **yourchurch** and the URC's Walking the Way with its focus on whole life discipleship. Baked into **yourchurch** from the very outset, therefore, was the hope that we could become an online church within the URC, rather than simply a congregation that met online.

We recognised, from the outset, that this was not a straightforward matter. Although we very deliberately organised ourselves along URC principles, URC ecclesiology did not recognise the possibility of online churches. Some of the biggest issues were obvious: membership, M&M/finances, safeguarding, mutual accountability, and relationship with the wider URC.

There were also issues that arose from within the congregation of **yourchurch** around membership. From the outset, there were some who wished to express their membership of the URC through **yourchurch** and others whose membership was with other churches (URC or otherwise), but who nevertheless regarded **yourchurch** as also “their” church because it offered them something different and vital. They want to be able to participate fully within the life and decision-making of **yourchurch**, which is hardly straightforward.

We are very grateful to the United Reformed Church for this opportunity to explore together how to make it possible for an online congregation to become a member church of the denomination. Particularly, we are grateful to the North Western (NW) Synod for being prepared to exercise Synod oversight, and to the Faith and Order Committee for its committed work on URC ecclesiology in order to allow for online churches like **yourchurch** to be recognised as URC churches.

The papers we have submitted are what we are hoping to achieve in terms of membership, finance and governance, and church community. They represent the results of a careful consultation process that has included the **yourchurch** congregation, the NW Synod and the wider URC, and outline an initial recognisably URC framework within which we might achieve our aims. We recognise that we are in new territory with an opportunity to create something unique; we are therefore asking for your help to see how far we can get collectively in realising those ambitions, as well as for any insight, wisdom and creativity that you can offer us. We want to thank you in advance for your participation in this exploration.

yourchurch Patterns of Community

yourchurch is an online worshipping community which began on 16 August 2020 and recently marked its 130th online service. We have an established, regular congregation of people on 30-40 cameras, including worshippers from Germany and Taiwan, as well from the three nations that make up Great Britain.

Our preachers, ordained and lay, are drawn from across the United Reformed Church and more widely. We celebrate communion monthly, at which an ordained minister presides. We have an established relationship with both the Protestant churches of the Pfalz in Germany and the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem.

Services are publicised via email and Facebook.

Worship styles and practices are diverse, with various media and interactions being utilised, for example mentimeter, whiteboard and the Zoom chat facility being used for

prayer time. Music ranges from traditional hymns to secular music. Members of the congregation regularly read and lead the prayers. The congregation greatly appreciates the use of break-out rooms to reflect on and engage with the theme of the service.

Future opportunities

- To reach out to others who don't yet worship with **yourchurch**.
- To make connections to other online presences within the URC.
- To encourage the congregation to share information about **yourchurch** with others.
- To invite young people's groups to lead worship.
- To encourage more placing of weblinks in the wider URC.

Community

Background

Over the years since **yourchurch** started, an online faith community has been established. Strangers have become friends.

Contact is made with worshippers who may be missing from services for a number of weeks.

Some of those who worship with **yourchurch** are members of other churches – URC, or other denominations. Others with no church membership want to express their membership through **yourchurch**. Another group from within the **yourchurch** Leadership Team is exploring with the Faith and Order Committee how this may be achieved.

A website has been produced and is ready to go live, pending the requisite approvals.

Future opportunities

- To reflect on and establish robust pastoral support in an online setting. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. (Hebrews 10:24-25.)"
- To link into study groups from the wider church as well as continuing to offer our own, based on **yourchurch** worshippers' experiences.

Discipleship

Background

yourchurch offers a breadth of theology and covers relevant issues and topics. From the beginning, discipleship has been our primary focus.

yourchurch is the first online church to have gained the Bronze Eco-Church award from A Rocha.

There are plans to see how we can engage with Commitment for Life, perhaps in a new and radical way.

Future opportunities

- We are working towards our Silver Eco-Church award.
- To consider asking the congregation to invite friends to join them for a meal before a **yourchurch** service based on a topic which people can discuss around their tables.
- To continue and strengthen our links with Greenbelt. A live service was held with **yourchurch** from the Festival site last year.
- To consider a '10 am tomorrow slot', where worshippers reflect on how they live out their faith in their daily lives.

Proposed **yourchurch** Covenant.

We are a *fellowship* of disciples of Jesus who understand ourselves to be a part of the body of Christ, the Church.

We commit ourselves, through regular virtual gatherings, to centre our life around missional discipleship, and to support each other in walking the way of Jesus.

We commit ourselves to live out our life and mission in ways that are both in accordance with the Basis of Union and Structure of the United Reformed Church, and in accordance with the deepest ecumenical principles, holding both to be equally important.

As a *fellowship*, we commit to being open and transparent with each other about our membership of other churches. We remain accountable for our personal conduct to the denomination in which we each hold our membership. We are committed to honouring the ecumenical diversity of our community, working together to be an expression of the unity Christ wills for his church.

We seek to be an inclusive community, celebrating our diversity.

We commit ourselves to discern the mind of Christ through the **yourchurch** Church Meeting. We will be accountable to one another in honouring the decisions we make together as the body of Christ.

Structure of **yourchurch** comprises a *fellowship* of *Christian disciples*.

yourchurch *disciples* hold membership in a number of ways:

- Some are received into membership of **yourchurch** as members of the United Reformed Church, this being where their URC membership is recorded.
- Some hold membership in other United Reformed Churches from across the United Kingdom.
- Some hold membership in churches of other denominations that are part of ecumenical bodies in which the URC participates (such as CTE, Cytûn, CTBI, CWM, CPCE and WCC).

yourchurch governs its life through a Church Meeting. The Church Meeting has all the functions, privileges and responsibilities of every Church Meeting in the United Reformed Church, as set out in the Structure.

yourchurch welcomes all attendees to take part in its Church Meeting and will use consensus decision making (CDM) where possible. In matters that require a majority

decision, only those holding their United Reformed Church membership in **yourchurch** will have a vote.

The **yourchurch** leadership team can include any member of the United Reformed Church elected by the Church Meeting, and they will be ordained and inducted as Elders and have all the functions, privileges and responsibilities normally attributed to a United Reformed Church Elders' Meeting, as set out in the Structure. It may include observers who are not members of the URC, and it will keep a roll of **yourchurch** *disciples*, and of their membership details including the church, denomination and region to which they belong.

When by decision of the **yourchurch** Church Meeting, individuals are to be ordained or baptised, appropriate physical arrangements will be made while ensuring that the online congregation can also participate.

yourchurch will be held under the pastoral oversight of the North Western URC Synod, which gives its concurrence to the structure adopted by **yourchurch**. **yourchurch** will have all the usual opportunities to participate in the wider life of the United Reformed Church afforded to congregations through the Synod. It will make itself open to the guidance, oversight and scrutiny of the Synod.

While it is through North Western Synod that accountability to the United Reformed Church is expressed, individuals from **yourchurch** may choose to engage with other URC Synods and denominations to exercise aspects of their discipleship.

Any changes to the Covenant and Structure of **yourchurch** require a two-thirds majority vote of the Church Meeting, and concurrence by the North Western Synod.

yourchurch – finance and governance Ministry and Mission (M&M) Fund

Contributions to this fund are made by each church through the Synod to which it belongs and are calculated by that Synod (each Synod does this in its own way in order to raise the money asked of it by the denomination). Contributions to the M&M Fund (like contributions to one's local church) are voluntary, but that doesn't make them optional. Each Synod makes a pledge to the denomination and then works out how that pledge is going to be shared out into requests from each of its local churches.

The North Western Synod M&M assessment is made up of the following elements:

- An assessment of the church based on its membership and number of regular worshippers (as given in the January Annual Church Return) with a weighting based on the size of the church
 - A levy of 2% of the capital held by the church
 - A synod element, for the work of the synod itself which includes an element to cover ministers' expenses as these are incurred across a whole Missional Partnership and so paid by the Synod in the North West. The ministers' expenses part is not charged to churches which have no stipendiary ministry.
- The North West includes regular worshippers in its assessment in order to deal with the perception of the M&M as a membership tax and remove or reduce the apparent financial disincentive to becoming (or inviting people to become) church members. This is significant as many **yourchurch** worshippers will be regular worshippers elsewhere. An assessment for **yourchurch** might be best based on only those that **yourchurch** counts as members, so only those whose URC membership is held by **yourchurch**.

- **yourchurch** would need a conversation with the North Western Synod treasurer and finance committee about the way our M&M assessment will be calculated, looking at what constitutes membership in **yourchurch** and remembering that many who have a commitment to **yourchurch** may well have their membership in another URC, or a different Christian congregation.

Governance issues

Officers

A group of Elders, the Leadership team, would need to act as trustees for the church. Additionally, we would need to have a specific person to act as Treasurer and a named Church Secretary.

Bank account

The level of proof of an organisation's status required by banks nowadays to open a bank account would make it difficult for **yourchurch** to open an account. However, the Synod is likely to be willing to hold our church funds for us in its bank account. Effectively the Synod would act as the bank for **yourchurch**: receiving monies, paying bills and holding the balance. It would be for **yourchurch** to maintain accounts and authorise payments made by the Synod on our behalf. The Treasurer of **yourchurch** would keep accounts and authorise transactions according to the decisions of **yourchurch**, and Synod staff would manage the actual payments. This money would not appear in the accounts of the Synod.

Clearly, **yourchurch** finances are not going to involve banking of cash from Sunday offertory or events, or any of the complexities of building use, so the holding of our bank account by the Synod would in principle be relatively simple. It would also be possible for a local church to perform this function for **yourchurch** if one were willing.

Gift Aid

The level of proof of our charitable status to register to claim gift aid is much lower than that needed to open a bank account. **yourchurch** would be able to register with HMRC and claim back gift aid on donations in the same way as every other church.

Insurance

yourchurch would need Public Liability Insurance.

Safeguarding

yourchurch already has a safeguarding policy in place.

Data protection and copyright

yourchurch would comply with GDPR and all data protection requirements. It also has all the necessary copyright licences etc in place .