

# Paper Z1

## Life after 50?

### Synod Moderators

#### Basic information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	The Revd David Herbert dave.herbert@urc-northernsynod.org
<b>Action required</b>	Discussion. Potential to be a conversation starter at local church level.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None.</b>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	The report is offered to General Assembly and local churches <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• to reassess priorities</li><li>• to create space to envision and birth creative initiatives</li><li>• to embrace future uncertainty as a necessary part of kingdom-living</li><li>• to appreciate how God can use us, even as we are</li><li>• to find renewed confidence and hope.</li></ul>
<b>Main points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To consider how it feels to be part of the United Reformed Church in its sixth decade</li><li>• To help us think about looking ahead as well as looking back</li><li>• To be more comfortable with who and what we are, and think less about what we are not</li><li>• Providing the necessary space time and resources for pioneer work</li><li>• To enable people to see we already have all we need to be the people of God, recognising God's provision.</li></ul>
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Previous Synod Moderators' Reports to General Assembly.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Synod Moderators.

#### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	No direct impact from the report.
<b>External (eg ecumenical)</b>	Potential for local churches to reflect on mission, examine priorities in a constantly changing mission context.

## Life after 50?

1. So, the United Reformed Church has marked her jubilee year, and the last of the celebrations have taken place. The extra events and activities have run their course – worship both local and national, trees planted, meals shared, and many words written. Life after 50. How is it feeling? What is age? Only a number. It's how you feel, isn't it? So the adage goes.
2. The United Reformed Church is now into her sixth decade. Relatively speaking being in our 50's pales into insignificance when we think of much older Christian traditions! But on a more human individual scale, by the time we reach our 50's some pennies hopefully have begun to drop; some of life's most sweet and bitter experiences have left their mark; our earlier years, all those triumphs and disasters, begin to feel like a life lived by another, not ourselves.

## Looking back, looking ahead

3. Looking back over the decades it is true we see much continuity, along with much significant change too. Looking ahead we are trying to be more fleet of foot and as ever we are called along with all God's people to proactively respond to a rapidly changing mission context, fresh vision with pentecostal power as relevant and effective as it ever has been or will be. Although we are much smaller in the eyes of the world, can we really convince ourselves that God could truly have finished with us? Not at all!

*Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.  
Zecchariah 4:6b NRSV*

4. As we consider how much smaller we are than when we began in 1972, let's avoid sinking into the rabbit holes of frustration or disappointment in the way we see our particular expression of the body of Christ as the United Reformed Church, and instead become more comfortable in our own skin, as can sometimes happen in our later decades. For example, most of us might well know of a local congregation with an aging profile yet reaches out to a local nursing home/sheltered housing to great effect. We are navigating uncharted waters and sailing into a changing mission context which will necessitate changes across the whole Church on a scale not seen in these islands since the Reformation. The Church is not dying, but we are in transition. When Good Friday seemed to mark an existential calamity, Easter dawn was around the corner, and Jesus' followers soon came to understand this was a new beginning, and it had not turned out to be an end as they had feared. No denomination comes out of nowhere, nor does any part of the body of Christ ever wholly disappear into oblivion in the relay marathon of God's salvific history. Today the Gospel addresses the human condition and humanity's place in creation as effectively as it ever did. Our God is not a cruel God who invites us into divine mission and in the process sets us up to fail. God's promises are true.

## Becoming older, becoming more comfortable in our own skin

5. To be more comfortable in our own skin is not to be resigned to complacency, resignation, or consumed with wistful self-awareness that we cannot somehow turn the clock back. Quite the opposite! It is to be aware of who and what we are, to remember how God repeatedly works through the most unlikely of lives and in the most surprising ways. For example, the young shepherd David was asked to be something he was not, but understood he needed to be himself to fulfil his task of

defeating the taunting, intimidating Goliath, and so it must be for the United Reformed Church as we grow into our own skin and be comfortable in it.

*Saul clothed David with his armour; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul's sword over the armour, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.*

1 Samuel 17:38-40 NRSV

Saul and no doubt David's older brothers and everyone else present wanted to arm him to the teeth in a way which weighed him down – he did not have the size or strength sufficient for their conventional wisdom. Happily for the Israelite camp David possessed sufficient insight and confidence not to humour Saul, but instead cast off the armour pinning him down to the point of not being able to walk, and instead drew on his personal faith, shepherding experience, and reason as he stepped out into combat in apparent, but ultimately for Goliath lethal, vulnerability.

6. Maybe the world or our own inner inclinations nudge us to a conventional wisdom that what we need is a bigger church to fulfil God's purposes through us; or maybe a richer church; or newer buildings, or .... the list goes on. We can become absorbed, consumed by what we are not, but instead let's draw wisdom from young David's example, and depend on who we are, rather than pine for who and what we are not. David stepped out in faith, cloaked not in the world's power and wisdom, but in God's hands with discernment and trust. That is the spirit in which the United Reformed Church is to step out into our uncertain future, reassured that an uncertain future actually is the norm, that many of our forebears in the faith, and successors, will have or will face the same test of confidence and faith.

### **More lean, lithe, and fleet of foot**

7. Can we usefully draw closer to a self-awareness that enables us not to try and be what we are not? For example compared with the church of fifty years ago – we are much smaller, so let's not see that as a weakness, rather let's adapt and capitalise on how we are leaner and possess a lighter footprint, to explore new ways of being and doing church, and explore a more mixed ecclesial economy and recognise how one manifestation of congregational life, backbone of the United Reformed Church though it is, is not necessarily appropriate in every context. All this is made more possible precisely because we are now far more fleet of foot and agile, necessarily focusing on fewer core tasks, looking to wider resources and networks beyond our own immediate in-house resources, and using them well. There are already multiple good examples across our synods of small congregations in rural, urban and suburban neighbourhoods, who decided to find alternative premises when their older church buildings became burdensome, so finding a new lease of life. Such moves are often experienced as liberating, and in themselves open up the possibilities of hitherto unexplored partnerships and opportunities.
8. Let's nurture a culture whereby we focus on resourcing local congregations to have every opportunity to engage in God's mission in their own communities while making a habit of making space, giving time, and resourcing innovative pioneer initiatives some of which will be conduits into sustainable ways of discipling, service, and proclamation.

- Let's rediscover afresh through receptive ecumenism what it is that we can bring to the ecumenical table while equally importantly discovering what it is we can learn from sisters and brothers in other denominations and traditions that will enhance our presence, purpose, and proclamation in the mission context of Great Britain and wider global village in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For example, those congregations who have found new capacity for mission through sharing with ecumenical neighbours and thereby making a difference in their local communities beyond their own capacity had they remained on their own.

### **We already have all we need to be the people of God**

- To be more comfortable in our own skin means to recognise that through our trust in God's promises we can rest assured that, whatever our circumstances and expression of the gospel we live and embody, we already have all we need to be the people of God wherever God has placed us and at any particular moment in time. Here is an illuminating illustration recorded in The Acts of the Apostles –

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them. But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.*  
*The book of Acts 3: 1-8 NRSV*

- Expectations lie at the core of this encounter's dynamic: the expectations of not only the beggar but also the expectations on behalf of Peter and John and what they perceive they can bring to the situation. How can they restore this marginalised, impoverished and no doubt stigmatised individual back into his community? They are the first to openly concede they cannot provide the charity he is asking for, but they know they can offer something far more lasting and transformational in the name of Jesus. The beggar discovers a new beginning, new life, offering thanks and praise to God as he danced into the temple.

We already have all we need to be the people of God, right where we are.

- Peter and John knew very well what they did not have. But more importantly they knew what they did have! We share the same love, compassion, prayer life, openness to the Holy Spirit, teachings of Jesus, and the same commission from the risen Christ. So may it be for the United Reformed Church as we eagerly discover what life in Christ after 50 will mean, and look ahead eager to remain activists and agents in God's economy.

### **Personalia**

- Since our last report to General Assembly we have said farewell to Brian Jolly. Ruth Whitehead and Simon Walking have accepted calls to local pastorates, and Dave Herbert retires at the end of July 2023 after which Northern Synod welcomes their new Moderator, Kim Plumpton. Paul Whittle will also have retired by the time next year's Moderators' Report is presented. Clare Downing has moved from Wessex to

be Moderator at North Western. Ron Reed, our minute secretary stepped down this year, and we are grateful to Shirley Miller for taking up the role. We are thankful for their significant contribution to the meeting. As a meeting we look forward to welcoming new colleagues who will serve in the Wessex, South Western, and Northern Synods along with the National Synods of Wales and Scotland.

### **Questions for discussion in local churches**

1. What does being comfortable in our own skin mean in our local context?
2. What can we let go of to keep us lean, lithe, and fleet of foot as activists and agents in God's economy?
3. What does it take for us to realise we already have all we need to be the people of God?
4. How can we carve out the space and time to consider new initiatives?