

Paper A3

Reconciliation and Mediation Service

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Adrian Bulley adrian.bulley@urc.org.uk
Action required	Discussion.
Draft resolution(s)	Assembly Executive agrees in principle to the proposal to enter a service level agreement with Place for Hope for five years, with a review in year four, as detailed in Assembly Executive February 2024 Paper A3.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Initial report following consultation regarding the possibility of initiating a URC-wide reconciliation and mediation service.
Main points	
Previous relevant documents	General Assembly 2023: Paper A5 – Mediation and Reconciliation Resource.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators Methodist Connexional Team: Head of Ministries and Learning James Coleman and Lis Mullen (Northerly Synods) Carolyn Merry and Helen Boothroyd (Place for Hope) Fiona Bennett (immediate past Assembly Moderator) Secretary for Education and Learning Finance Committee.

Summary of impact

Financial	If approved, a service-level agreement with Place for Hope would cost £75,000 per annum over an initial five year term, with a review in year four.
External (eg ecumenical)	Methodist Connexional Team.

Background

General Assembly 2023 paper A5 had the following to say in support of resolution 2023:10:

“It has become obvious recently that across the Church there are an increasing number of conflicts that arise. In the context of a more litigious society, and in the light of the trauma of the pandemic, the Church is dealing with an ever-increasing number of

complaints rooted in conflicts. These are affecting local churches, Synods and the General Assembly.

The complaints process (Section Q) works on the basis that initially mediation is used, where at all possible, to try to resolve conflicts before moving to formal investigation. However, those operating the policy have to seek individuals willing to take on mediation. We have no standing panel that either Synods or the General Assembly can draw upon, to bring expertise in this area.

The Business Committee believes this is something which could be of service to the whole church, and therefore invites General Assembly to initiate a process of consultation to test this, and if appropriate, to bring costed proposals to Assembly Executive in 2023.

There will be good experience to draw upon from the Northerly Synods who have worked with a 'Listening and Reconciliation' service. There will also be expertise and experience to draw upon from ecumenical partners (the Church of Scotland and Methodist Churches have developed similar services in places) and from expert organisations in the field, such as Place for Hope and Bridge Builders.

We envisage a process of consultation with Synods, as well as partners with expertise in this area, to test the feasibility, and costs, of developing a mediation and reconciliation service to assist the flourishing of the whole United Reformed Church."

Resolution 2023:10 says: "General Assembly instructs the Business Committee to consult widely and bring costed proposals for a URC-wide Mediation and Reconciliation Service to Assembly Executive 2024".

What follows represents the fruits of a period of consultation and reflection.

Northerly Synods' Listening and Reconciliation Service

The five synods in the northern parts of the British Isles (Northern, North Western, Mersey, Yorkshire and Scotland) have for many years been exploring how collaborative action may assist them to support local churches more effectively.

In a 2017 application to the URC Legacy Fund, they wrote: "Providing facilitation and assistance to churches undergoing change is essential. The Synods recognise that the extent of change anticipated is likely to create difficulties for churches, possibly even conflict at times. Periods of feeling unsettled can be a natural expression of the movement of the Spirit as well as a human response, all of which can lead to difficulty for some."

Following careful consideration and appraisal, a partnership was proposed, initially with Place for Hope (see below); latterly they developed their own course to train people in mediation skills.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 and personnel changes intervened before this vision could be fully realised. Some of those involved felt that the Listening and Reconciliation Service lacked appropriate support for those engaging in mediation, and this may well have contributed to it faltering.

There remains a small cohort of people in the northerly synods who have been trained and might still be willing to be used and (with further training) form part of a reconciliation and mediation team for the URC. A further tranche of people expressed interest in being trained, but that was curtailed by Covid-19.

This proposal builds upon the innovative work done by the northerly Synods and takes account of the consideration and appraisal they have carried out.

Methodist Connexional Reconciliation and Mediation Team

The Methodist Connexion launched a pilot project in June 2021 within three of its Learning Network Regions (covering thirteen districts; one third of the whole). Following evaluation in 2023, since 1 October 2023, the project has been expanded across the Connexion.

Further information can be found here: **www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/guidance-for-churches/reconciliation-and-mediation-team-pilot-project/**.

Like the proposals initially developed by the northerly Synods, the Reconciliation and Mediation Team is delivered in partnership with Place for Hope which, through a service level agreement, offer a team of accredited mediation practitioners and have delivered for the Connexion:

- Project management
- Administrative support
- Initial training (two three day courses and one accreditation day) including travel and accommodation
- Case supervision for those accredited
- On-going professional development and learning
- Access to experienced accredited practitioners to partner with those newly accredited
- All expenses for those offering mediation.

The team is fully funded from the Connexional budget, with no cost to end users (congregations, circuits or districts).

Over the course of the three-year pilot project, eighteen practitioners were trained and accredited by Place for Hope (an approximate 50:50 split between presbyters and lay people). During the same period, 42 cases were rereferred to the team.

With the expansion of the project to include the entire Connexion, it is anticipated that further people will be accredited with the hope that the team will have expanded to include 60 people within the first full five years.

Like The United Reformed Church, the Methodist Connexion often struggles to find accredited practitioners who are truly independent of a particular situation in order to provide objectivity. It is recognised that, were the URC to follow a parallel route in its consideration of a mediation and reconciliation team, there would be benefits to both denominations in having access to accredited practitioners from across the UK.

Place for Hope

Place for Hope (see **www.placeforhope.org.uk**) is a charity which has its historical roots in the Church of Scotland but which has been an independent charity since 2015

to enable the gift of this work to reach more people. They now work in partnership with the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Methodist Connexion.

Place for Hope has a long history of offering foundation training to people wishing to be equipped as mediators, leading to accreditation through Scottish Mediation. They also offer supervision and continuing professional development for their accredited mediators.

As well as training mediators, the charity is also committed to facilitating culture change in order that conflict is avoided wherever possible. For example, they offer a course, delivered online, called Living Well with Differences.

Place for Hope talk about conflict transformation, rather than conflict resolution.

Proposal

There are many good reasons for entering a service-level agreement with Place for Hope:

1. Staffing

There would be no need for the URC to employ additional staff to administer the team, develop training or deliver training.

2. Cost

There would be no need for the URC to bear any additional costs in terms of buying in reconciliation and mediation from external contractors. The most recent (November 2023) engagement on behalf of the General Assembly with purchasing a mediation/facilitation service to address one situation in a Synod will cost £100 per hour for what is likely to >8 hours.

3. Objectivity

The pool of URC accredited practitioners could be added to the pool of accredited practitioners from the Methodist Church, Church of Scotland and Scottish Episcopal Church to ensure that people can be found for any situation which may arise who have no prior knowledge of individuals, their background, location or circumstances. Likewise, URC accredited practitioners might be available to other denominations for the same reasons.

4. Experience

Place for Hope has a proven track record of providing precisely the service we require.

5. Ecumenical

It would be very good to be able to work with ecumenical partners in offering such a service.

6. Prevention

Ministers might be encouraged to access the Living Well with Difference course as part of Education for Ministry 3. In addition, Synod Training and Development Officers might be trained to cascade the training within their Synods. Both approaches could begin to change the culture that gives rise to conflict.

One weakness with General Assembly resolution 2023:10 is that it could be construed as 'buying in' a service to solve our problems. There could be much more to it than that,

of course. This could be an opportunity to shift the culture throughout the URC to transform how we respond and engage with conflict. It is an opportunity to learn to model a peacemaker way of being which could be prophetic in our local communities and society. It is a very tangible opportunity to develop discipleship, evangelism and mission.

Place for Hope's bespoke proposal for The United Reformed Church can be found in the Annexe to this paper. In essence, it seeks to:

- “train, equip, deploy and support a team of skilled URC mediators
- make available mediation support across the URC within five years
- open learning pathways for ordained and lay people from senior leadership to grassroots to understand and live better with differences, change and conflict”.

The first two of those aims are clearly what was envisaged by the General Assembly resolution (2023:10); the third aim extends that resolution to begin to instil cultural change throughout the denomination.

The cost of providing the service that Place for Hope is offering may be thought to be high at £75,000 per year, initially for five years, with a review in year four, but the benefits as outlined above, may make that cost seem rather more reasonable.

Understandably, those who hold the General Assembly purse strings are extremely wary about the prospect of increasing the current budget deficit further and wonder whether there are other ways of funding the scheme.

The funding options appear to be:

1. Fund from the General Assembly budget.
2. Explore whether any of the Synods might be willing to fund this for an initial period, ultimately – perhaps – funding this work through inter-synod resource sharing.
3. Explore other funding streams
4. Ask churches and Synods who use the service to pay for it.

A steer from Assembly Executive on these (or other) funding options will be welcome.

It should be emphasised that options 4 is by no means cost neutral as far as the General Assembly is concerned. Experience suggests that the General Assembly (like churches and Synods) is likely to be a heavy user of such a scheme and that will be a cost. Not to set up a scheme such as this at all will continue to involve both Synods and the General Assembly in significant expenditure in purchasing such a service piece meal.

Annexe



Place for Hope Proposal to the United Reformed Church Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation Programme

Background

Place for Hope (P4H) accompanies and equips people and faith communities so that all might reach their potential to be peacemakers who navigate conflict, change and differences well. We welcome long-term partnerships with denominations to embed a culture of reconciliation and peace-making. We offer a broad programme of foundation training in conflict transformation together with the training and support of a specialist team of mediators. This model has been tried and tested through a pilot programme in the Methodist Church and is currently being rolled out across the Methodist Connexion.

The United Reformed Church (URC) General Assembly 2023 passed a resolution to consult and bring to General Assembly 2024 costed proposals for a URC-wide Mediation and Reconciliation service. Following meetings of the URC-lead, first with the Methodist Church lead for their P4H partnership, then with P4H, we were invited to submit this proposal.

Place for Hope has delivered various training elements to the Northerly Synods of the URC in earlier years. We very much welcome this opportunity to offer an integrated programme of longer-term training and support across the whole United Reformed Church.

Purpose and Nature of Programme

This proposal responds to the General Assembly resolution 2023 - extending the scope of what was envisaged therein - on the basis of P4H's recent experience of programme delivery to embed a culture of reconciliation for other partners, notably the Methodist Church and the Church of Scotland, and our recent discussions with the URC-lead.

We propose an integrated programme to begin to embed a culture of reconciliation and peace-making across the United Reformed Church in Britain. This programme would:

- train, equip, deploy and support a team of skilled URC mediators;
- make available mediation support across the URC within five years;
- open learning pathways for ordained and lay people from senior leadership to grassroots to understand and live better with differences, change and conflict.

It is our experience that for a culture of reconciliation to begin to embed in a denomination it is necessary to integrate mediation team training and development with broader training programme to raise awareness and understanding across that denomination of the dynamics of conflict, including personal conflict styles, and how to live well with differences. Without this integration, cycles of conflict continue, and mediation is largely a 'firefighting' response to situations of high conflict. Mediation alone cannot bring about culture change.

Key Programme Elements

1. Training of a team of mediation practitioners from the URC using P4H's residential *Faith in Change and Conflict* course.
2. Assessment of mediation practitioners.
3. Accreditation of successful practitioners through Scottish Mediation.
4. Supervision of URC mediators.

5. Mentored paired deployment of URC mediators, alongside a more experienced P4H practitioner, to both URC and other cases. Online mediation is used by P4H where suitable and acceptable to the parties in the case, but in-person mediation is always made available where preferred by the client or more suitable for the nature of the case, e.g. large-scale facilitated conversation with a congregation.
6. Phased provision of facilitated conversation, mediation and coaching support in situations of conflict, change and transition across the URC in Britain.
7. Ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) for all URC mediators (in line with annual accreditation requirements).
8. Delivery of a range of P4H's foundation courses for ordained and lay people across the URC, either through direct delivery of an agreed number of open online training courses or through a Train the Trainer programme (in-person or online) or an agreed combination of the two. Courses to select from include:
 - Living Well with Differences
 - Growing through Change and Conflict
 - Responding to Bullying and Harassment
 - Journeying through Change and Transition
 - Leading through Change and Transition
 - Scripture, Spirituality and ConflictWe recommend that the programme of courses offered be developed with P4H's training team on the basis of an analysis of need.
9. Bespoke training provision for specific ministries, groups, and events which may be agreed between the partners.

Programme Implementation

Duration

We recommend an initial 5-year programme to allow sufficient time for both foundation training and mediation support to be made available across the whole United Reformed Church in Britain. We envisage that this programme would run from September 2024 to August 2029. It would be possible to offer a shorter 3-year pilot programme across selected synods if preferred. However, the delivery model has already been piloted in the Methodist Church and then moved forward to roll-out, so we recommend moving straight into a full 5-year URC programme.

Phasing

To ensure quality and deliver a professional-standard mediation service there would need to be a phased roll-out of the reconciliation and mediation team, as in the Methodist Connexion. This is necessary to train and bring onstream mediators gradually and in a manageable way to minimise risk, maximise stakeholder engagement and ensure the service is fit for purpose. Similarly, a phased programme of foundation training would be agreed based on learning pathways.

Plan

We would provide a detailed programme plan for approval by an agreed joint programme management body within the first four months of the partnership. The phasing over the 5-year life of the programme would be clearly set out in the programme plan and expectation management prioritised.

Ecumenical deployment infrastructure

The ecumenical aspect of our model of mediation support infrastructure is of benefit to denominational partners through positive cross-fertilisation and enhancement of ecumenical partnership. URC mediators would join the P4H volunteer practitioner team, deployed in pairs on an ecumenical range of cases and often partnered with a practitioner from a different denomination. This brings to cases both in-depth denominational knowledge and an outside perspective, while offering mediators a wider range of casework experience. All URC practitioners would be deployed on a variety of URC cases during the programme period, with probable deployment to other cases too. Supervision, CPD and deployment infrastructure would all be provided by P4H throughout this 5-year programme.

Programme Management

P4H would be responsible for the operational management of the programme in close collaboration with a named partnership lead for the URC. We recommend the appointment of a combined Steering Committee for strategic vision and oversight of the partnership programme comprised of appropriate representatives of both partners and chaired by the URC partnership lead. P4H would prepare and present regular update reports to the Steering Committee.

Programme Outcomes

Where there is unresolved conflict, churches often look inwards; where they are empowered to live well with differences and work together positively through change and conflict, churches look outwards and are more effective missionally.

Programme outcomes would include:

- a. Strengthened support for those in ministry – lay and ordained – to navigate change, differences, and conflict well.
- b. Embedding of a spirit of conflict transformation and the ministry of reconciliation into the relationships, culture and systems of the URC.
- c. Synods and local churches released from internal conflict to focus on fulfilling their mission and ministry.

Finance and Costings

Place for Hope is able to offer the proposed programme at an annual cost to the United Reformed Church of £75,000 per year.

An indicative breakdown of the projected averaged annual costs of running the programme is shown here:

Staffing	£53,000	5-6 total P4H staff days per week: for programme management, training co-ordination and delivery, practitioner support, client care, personnel management, operations and finance management, administration, evaluation, communications.
Direct delivery	£20,000	For training, mediator assessment, mediator support and deployment - including on venues, travel, accommodation, subsistence, materials.
Full cost recovery	£2,000	Towards administration, communications, governance, finance costs of the charity.
Annual total	£75,000	

The balance of these costs would vary from year-to-year across the life of the programme and depending on the nature of certain elements, for example the model of foundation training delivery agreed. The annual funding would be used primarily for the building of capacity in the early years of the programme, with a higher proportion of the funding spent on delivery of support in later years. The annual expenditure may vary between years, but a restricted fund would be used by Place for Hope to manage any such variation.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Review

P4H would gather evidence throughout the programme to enable in-depth analysis. We would monitor and evaluate the impact of the programme using a robust Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) Framework, including success criteria, monitoring of outputs, and evaluative outcomes identified by result areas through key performance indicators, both qualitative and quantitative.

P4H would agree a regular reporting schedule with the URC partnership lead. We recommend a mid-term review of strategic direction by the partners. We would present a detailed review report in the first part of 2029 to enable URC decision-making on next steps.

P4H employs a capacity development approach to enable us to roll-out our vocational training and support across an increasingly wide range of partner organisations over time. Our long-term aim is to enable those denominations which work with us on creating a culture of reconciliation and peace-making through foundation training and mediation team training and deployment, to eventually be able to take all the infrastructure support functions of a mediation team (supervision, deployment, CPD, annual accreditation) in-house. This is not possible in the life of a single 5-year programme. Given the parallel journeys we are undertaking with several denominations which already work together on a range of issues, we envisage a possibility that in the long-term the development of internal infrastructure capacity might be able to be undertaken ecumenically, e.g. Methodist and URC together. We would hope to be invited to propose a further programme for the next stages of capacity development towards the end of this programme period, assuming the positive feedback and review outcomes envisaged.