

Paper X1

Synod changes

North Western and Mersey Synods

Basic information

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Action required	
Draft resolution(s)	General Assembly transfers Wilmslow United Reformed Church from the North Western Synod into Mersey Synod, and instructs the two Synods to effect this transfer at a date convenient to all parties, and to notify that date to the General Secretary.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Agreement of movement of a Church between Synods.
Main points	
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	

Following conversations within North Western Synod, Wilmslow United Reformed Church began thinking about its place within the Synod and sensed a call to consider whether it might be better located within Mersey.

Those conversations led to the following process, described on behalf of Wilmslow URC:

In the Autumn of 2022, the Elders from Wilmslow URC contacted North Western Synod Executive with a request to explore the possibility of moving from North Western Synod into Mersey Synod as one option in thinking about the future ministry and mission of the Church.

The meeting with representatives of North Western Synod and Mersey Synod was held with three Elders in January 2023. At this meeting both Synods made it clear to the Church that it was for it to discern its future and that the Synods would support that

decision. What was originally thought to be a meeting when we might need to argue our case, became a completely different discussion and exploration of what the future might look like in a very prayerful and reflective manner. For this we remain extremely grateful to both Synods.

Over the next couple of months, the Elders reflected and prayed about the next steps and in March 2023 we informed the Church meeting of what we had been discussing and thinking about.

On the return of our Minister, the Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe, from sabbatical in April 2023 we held a special meeting of the Elders to consider our options and discuss our feelings. The result of those discussions that Saturday morning resulted in a unanimous decision by the Elders to hold a special Church meeting to discuss the options with Church members.

This one agenda item meeting was held on 28 May. There were a number of questions from Church members that were answered but following discussions it was agreed that a formal resolution would be brought to the regular June Church meeting to seek a move to Mersey Synod.

“With the unanimous approval of the Elders Meeting, the Church Meeting of Wilmslow United Reformed Church proposes that the said congregation be transferred from the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church to the Mersey Synod and commits itself to engage prayerfully in the process of discernment by the wider Church.”

This resolution was presented to the meeting on 25 June and was passed (49 in favour and one abstention). The gap between the two meetings was deliberate to allow members time to reflect, pray and consider what they were being asked.

Every Church goes on a journey in working to build the Kingdom and find its mission and ministry for the community and neighbourhood.

Wilmslow's history as one of the largest Churches in the URC may not be quite the same now as it once was but we bring with us a legacy of a lot of work within the local area with other Churches and charities, for the Synod and for the National Church. Our Elders and members have been heavily involved in the Councils of the Church and therefore the feelings of making a move should not be read as being easy decisions. Our links to North Western Synod have been very strong and in a couple of cases continue to the present day.

Two things in particular thought have brought us to this point in our journey.

When North Western Synod invited the Churches in each Missional Partnership to think about whether they were in the right Partnership for them, this opened a door to a conversation in Wilmslow about how we felt about being in a Partnership that was, other than Macclesfield and Bollington, focused on Stockport and South Manchester. We decided that in thinking about this and presenting our conclusions to our Church meeting that we should think about all the possibilities, including moving Synods. It felt right to look at all options in order to be sure and clear about recommendations that we might make, whatever they might be.

More particularly though, in preparing our section for the Missional Partnership vacancy profile issued early in 2023, we came to a growing realisation that our mission was focused on our community in Wilmslow and was very definitely linked in all kinds of ways

to Cheshire East. That is where our hospital is and where the crematorium is. Our youth work through the Wilmslow Youth charity that we helped to give birth to is focused on the High School in the town with a clear Cheshire focus. And before, during and since the pandemic, our work with the local Health Centre and support for the pharmacy are linked to the Cheshire health services. We host meetings of the Town Council and have been working with them on the provision of support to Ukrainian families. We work with Cheshire East through the Bollin Partnership, are a Connected Community Centre for Cheshire East and were a Warm Places hub this past winter.

Whilst we recognise that geographically we are marginally further away from the URCs in Cheshire than we are to those in our Missional Partnership, our people, our town and inclination is looking south and west rather than north. We are on the doorstep of Greater Manchester and our town was created as a suburban setting for the owners of factories to get away from the cities, but in all of everyday life we are part of the Cheshire community.

We have reflected in a couple of settings that our process and decision making has taken some time as we look back over the past twelve months. However, we have refused to apologise for this as it has taken us that time to pray and reflect on what we were asking of each other and what it would mean for our future.

For these reasons, shifting our focus in a different direction for our continuing journey feels to be the right decision to us. Over 175 years have passed since our Church started in the town and the foundations of the building were laid down. Whether the Councils of the Church concur with our decision is in God's hands, but we know that God has guided our thoughts and discussions, answered our prayers and helped to signpost us to our next steps for ministry and mission for all God's people in our town and in the wider world.