

Synod Moderators' Report

Synod Moderators

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Jamie Kissack moderator@urcyorkshire.org.uk
Action required	Discussion.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	The report is offered to General Assembly and to local churches to remind ourselves of the centrality of vocation, and to challenge ourselves about the need to articulate our faith.
Main points	Vocation is central to many aspects of our faith, and the Moderators' role involves us in vocations at many levels. We know that God's call is still alive and active in the church. However, we believe that in general we are much less confident and effective at articulating our faith. We encourage the churches to think about what the next step might be to become a community more confident in sharing the faith that is in us.
Previous relevant documents	Previous Synod Moderators' Reports to General Assembly. The Theos report, <i>'The United Reformed Church, A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads'</i> .
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	

The theme of 'vocation' is never far away in the biblical narrative.

The prophetic call rings out through the pages of the Old Testament, as in different ages God calls unlikely and reluctant individuals to speak God's truth to the faith community and to the world.

The call of Jesus to his disciples frames the Gospel narratives, from the early encounters of the fishermen by Lake Galilee to the great commission of the risen Jesus. And that calling is not just to the named 12 whom we tend to call 'The Disciples', but to a wider group of women and men who responded to the astounding authority of Jesus, and took radical steps to follow in loving obedience to the God whom he called 'Father'.

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And the apostle Paul's profound sense of being called by the Spirit to bring both Jew and Gentile to Christ is nothing if not a vocation – one he pursues with courage, imagination and energy.

From beginning to end, the bible is a book about vocation.

The worship life of the church echoes that strong biblical theme. Some of our most joyful and singable hymnody is about the call of Jesus, and our response:

*Will you come and follow me
if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?*

It is one of the great privileges of our role as Moderators that we are often involved in the discernment of call within the life of the United Reformed Church. Vocations of different kinds come within our remit. It is our experience that there is nothing more rewarding than sharing with others the unfolding of an exploration of a vocation to ministry.

- Moderators are usually among the first to share with those who are exploring a call to one of our formal ministries, and we will often be fellow travellers as individuals progress through the Candidating process, along with our Candidating Secretaries and TDOs.
- We are intimately involved in the discernment process when ministers seek a move between pastorates or roles. This is always more than just 'seeking another job'. Even though the territory is getting much more complicated, with most calls involving groups and teams, nonetheless we do not lose our strong sense that we are seeking the calling of the Spirit in finding a good match between the gifts and graces of a minister and the missional needs of a pastorate. Every settlement process is set within the framework of vocation, and much careful, prayerful work is done to recognise this.
- Within our individual Synods, we delight in the nurturing of vocations to more local ministries, in eldership, lay leadership, lay pioneering, lay preaching and worship leading. We could all tell stories of people who have been transformed through their obedient response to the call to take up ministry within the local church. How wonderful to see people set on fire by the opportunities to minister and lead in different, Gospel-centred ways
- Then there are all those people we meet, week by week, whose involvement in the local church is so much more than just turning up or filling the rota. These are the people who, through their joyful worship and Christ-shaped service, make our churches places where others want to be and serve. It is humbling to see the dedication of those whose vocation is so vital to the church, and yet which often receives little formal recognition.
- And, of course, we as Moderators are all individuals attempting in our context to remain obedient to a very personal call to discipleship of Jesus that has sustained

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us through our varied ministries, and to discover what it means in a collegial setting to share and explore that calling together.

*Will you leave your self behind
if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare,
will you let me answer prayer
in you and you in me?*

From our particular place within the life of the United Reformed Church, we are in no doubt that God is still calling people to vibrant Christian ministry through our churches. How important it is that we listen to those stories of call with a ready, discerning and supportive heart. There is no doubt that the greater resource of the church is its people, called and committed to the work of the Kingdom.

The Theos report, '*The United Reformed Church, A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads*', published in 2023, celebrated the URC's commitment to vibrant community outreach, but wondered whether we are quite so good at giving an account of the faith which inspires it. We welcome the report, and recognise that it gives an accurate and insightful picture of the United Reformed Church. It fits with our experience of a church in which many people feel called, but in which many also feel unsure as to how to give an account of our faith.

Is it the case, we wonder, that articulating our sense of call has become too private an affair, hidden within the processes of the church rather than being writ large, and spoken out, through the life of the local church in our communities?

*Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?*

Every local church is in a particular context, and will be at a different point in their missional journey. We wonder what it might look like for each congregation to take a next step towards being more confident in articulating their faith to the wider world, and giving an account of why the good news of Jesus actually matters?

Perhaps the challenge is to create the place in which conversations can happen. One church in Yorkshire Synod recently went into partnership with a charity redistributing excess supermarket food, using their premises as a distribution hub. Inspired by *Leading Your Church Into Growth*, they took the initiative to open up the church worship area for those waiting, providing refreshments, and creating a space to meet people and engage in open conversation.

Perhaps the missional challenge is to have the right resources to start conversations about faith. As part of Mersey Synod's Talking Faith initiative, they bought each of their

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churches a number of easy-read Bibles to give out during their carol services. The Bibles are good quality, abridged, and have short prayers in the margin for those who are not used to praying.

Or perhaps the missional challenge is to 'get serious' about inviting people to engage with the good news of Jesus. One church from Eastern Synod tells its story like this:

'We have always had a desire to share our faith, but not always found it easy. Eventually, we realised that we had to be far more intentional and plan regular activities, even if we didn't have the numbers. So, we planned accordingly, in faith. Over the past few years, we have had ongoing Alpha courses throughout each year. When we finish one, we have the next planned, and we try and get people who attended to reattend the next course. We have seen more than 30 people attend these courses, and many make commitments to Jesus for the first time. This has led to baptism services and 'welcome to church' evenings. We now have a strong team of people who want to support and lead ongoing Alpha courses.'

There is no shortage of resources to help us share our faith and to develop our missional strategy, from within our own denomination and beyond. But none of this missional activity will count for anything, of course, if we are not ready and equipped to give an account of our own faith commitment. The same church from Eastern Synod goes on to say:

'We have also found that if we want to get better at anything, we practise. So we try and create a culture in church where we practise sharing our testimonies of what God has done for us. This could be very basic, but it enables us to be increasingly confident in sharing the Good News we carry.'

We recognise that giving voice to our own faith needs to be done with care. Good and faithful mission always needs to integrate word and action in a coherent whole; effective evangelism always needs to listen as faithfully as it speaks; and the goal of mission is not to get our own voice across, but to allow God's voice to speak. This said, we encourage the United Reformed Church in all its wonderful, God-given diversity to be serious about how we give an account of the hope that is in us.

*Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.
In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.*

John Bell and Graham Maule
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Personalia

Since our last report to General Assembly, there have been a significant number of changes to our meeting. We have said farewell to Simon Walking as he moved into a local pastorate. We said farewell to Dave Herbert and Paul Whittle who have both retired. We have welcomed Kim Plumpton to the role of Northern Synod Moderator, Michael Hopkins as the Moderator of Wessex Synod, Lindsey Sanderson as the

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Moderator of the National Synod of Scotland and Dave Salsbury as the Moderator of the National Synod of Wales.

As a meeting, we look forward to completing the team as we welcome David Downing as the new Moderator of South Western Synod.

Questions for discussion

1. How ready and effective are we at expressing our own commitment to being disciples of Jesus, and what might help us to be more effective?
2. How does our way of life, our commitments and priorities, help or hinder other people's openness to the Gospel?
3. How does the way we live our life together in the church strengthen one another's faith?
4. In what ways are the answers to the first three questions the same or different? How do they inform each other?