

Paper X2

A Church with People at the Margins: A Strategy for Mission and Ministry

North Western Synod

Basic information

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Action required	
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 52 In response to General Assembly 2023 resolution 31 (c) the North Western Synod commends its strategy document 'A Church with People at the Margins: A Strategy for Mission and Ministry' to the wider church. We encourage all parts of the church to reflect on its implications for their own areas of responsibility. Resolution 53 We request that Assembly Committees and Task Groups consider the implications of our strategy particularly in respect of the priority that is given to the allocation of resources (people, finance and other resources) for ministry and mission to churches working within the most economically deprived neighbourhoods and with low-income communities. Proposals to demonstrate our commitment to people experiencing poverty and marginalisation should be brought to General Assembly 2025.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Encourage further discussion, reflection and action on the expressed desire to challenge poverty and marginalisation.
Main points	Presenting the North Western Synod's response to General Assembly 2023 Resolution 31 (c).
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	Ministries and Mission Committee.

Summary of impact

Financial	
External (eg ecumenical)	

At its meeting in October 2022, the North Western Synod Meeting asked that an “Anti-Poverty” Strategy be developed for the Synod in partnership with Church Action on Poverty.

A working group including colleagues from Church Action on Poverty, Synod Officers and Staff, Ministers and lay representatives from local churches met over the last twelve months to develop a strategy that recognises the contribution that both North Western Synod as a whole and the individual churches who make up the Synod can make to this important agenda.

The principles of providing Dignity, Agency and Power and responding to those who are poverty experienced had been considered by Synod at its last meeting. These principles and other emerging aspects of the strategy were circulated to local churches for discussion and consideration following that meeting. These were also considered at the meeting of the Mission Network in November.

The proposed strategy is set out in the document, “A Church with People at the Margins: A Strategy for Mission and Ministry” which follows this report. The body of the document comprises four sections:

- Our Call to Mission
- Our Commitments as a Synod
- Our Challenge to our Member Churches
- Our Support for our Member Churches.

In response to feedback from the consultation, the document also contains an appendix which provides short definitions of “Dignity, Agency and Power.” The strategy as drafted is intended to provide a long term focus for the life of North Western Synod. In order to provide time for all Synod Committees to consider how to respond to the strategy (assuming it is adopted), the recommendations propose that the implementation plan is initially reported to the North Western Synod Meeting in twelve months’ time. This will also provide time for some of the immediate commitments to be put in place and recognised at a Synod Meeting. In Summer 2023, URC General Assembly passed a number of resolutions regarding the church’s response to poverty. One of the resolutions (31(c)) asked: *“the Mission and Ministries Committees and the Synods to reflect on how the Church could better demonstrate its commitment to people experiencing poverty and marginalisation in allocating resources for ministry and mission, and bring proposals, if appropriate, to a future General Assembly”*

The Strategy presented for adoption at this meeting sets out how North Western Synod demonstrates its commitment to people experiencing poverty and marginalisation. North Western Synod now wishes to offer its Strategy document to General Assembly and invites General Assembly to consider whether the document, or elements from it, could assist in the development of work within the denomination as a whole, as a response to, and reflecting the desire expressed in the 2023 General Assembly Resolution 31.

URC North Western Synod – A Church with People at the Margins

A Strategy for Mission and Ministry

Our call to Mission

The prophet Amos (5:24) reminds us that we should:

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” and Jesus in his teaching reminds us of the centrality of service for others in the mission and ministry of the church (Matthew 25:37&40)

“Then the righteous will answer him ‘Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink’.... And the king will answer ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me’”

Two of the five marks of mission emphasise the calling of the church to the service of others:

3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

This document sets out our commitments to respond to that call to mission and ministry.

Our responsibilities in responding

In living out our calling to be a church with people at the margins we believe that we must both respond to people’s needs with compassion but also hear and respond to their voices about changes needed in our society.

We believe that all people are created in the image of God and should have life in all fullness and to flourish with all of God’s creation. We believe that the creation of community where all people are able to live with Dignity, Agency and Power is essential to that ambition.

We commit ourselves to listening to God’s voice through the experiences of people living at the margins and to build our response on those messages. In our actions in mission and ministry we seek to demonstrate our principles in action by ensuring that those we encounter are provided with Dignity, Agency, and Power.

Our commitments as a Synod

In our work as a Synod of the United Reformed Church, our priorities for mission and ministry will respond to the challenges we have set ourselves in adopting this strategy. This strategy compliments the commitments we have made in our Environment Policy and also in regard to Racism and Modern Day Slavery. We direct the Synod Trust to act in accordance with these priorities where it is using monies and other resources held on behalf of the Synod.

Some of our responses will demonstrate how we will support our churches in responding to the needs of their local communities, particularly in areas of the most acute disadvantage in our province. These will be set out in the final part of this strategy. Others will be actions we will take collectively as a Synod, with our Trust company, to

demonstrate how we are seeking to create community based on dignity, agency, and power for all people.

In adopting this strategy, we make these specific commitments:

Church Action on Poverty

We will continue to support the work of Church Action on Poverty through money and other support. In particular, we will be an active participant in their research on Church at the Margins and seek to put into practice lessons learnt from that work.

Living wage

We believe that fair pay is an important Christian principle. As a demonstration of this the Synod commits to achieving accreditation with the Living Wage Foundation as a Living Wage employer by the end of 2024.

Food

Access to food is essential to people's wellbeing. We will continue to support the important work played by foodbanks in addressing the basic needs of too many people in our communities. However, we believe that choice in food is part of providing people with dignity, agency and power and we will in particular support the development of Your Local Pantry and other "food clubs" where members are able to exercise dignity, choice, and hope.

Housing

We see the availability of truly affordable housing (1) as vital to people's dignity. The Synod commits to working with Housing Justice's Faith in Affordable Housing Project to develop such provision prioritising the use of our surplus land and buildings for this purpose. We will seek the support of the Synod Trust who act as Custodian Trustee for all our land and buildings in this ambition.

Community empowerment

We see community empowerment as a key part of ensuring that all people have agency and can exercise power over their life. The Synod will offer to become a funding partner in any Citizens UK Chapters (Currently Lancashire and Greater Manchester) established within our area and to encourage local churches to work with Citizens UK on matters of importance to people in their local communities.

Campaigning

The Marks of Mission call us to "transform unjust societies." We will seek to be active participants in campaigns relevant to our vision of a Just society. Most immediately we will support the work of the "Let's End Poverty" campaign in ensuring that the challenges of poverty and disadvantage are key themes in the campaigning at the next General Election. We will continue to listen actively to people with lived experience to understand their needs and priorities. We will continue to consider how best to develop this strategy in the light of that feedback.

Our challenge to our member churches

Local churches who constitute the North Western Synod are key to the delivery of this strategy. They are able to focus on the particular needs of their local community. Over a third of our churches are located in parishes serving the 10% most deprived communities in England (2). These needs arise from a variety of different contexts, urban, rural, and coastal and are located across all areas of our Synod.

All of our churches are located in areas where parts of their community experience disadvantage and exclusion. Many of them already work actively in those communities and we celebrate and support that work. We encourage our churches to partner with other local organisations and be willing to contribute to their work to address the needs of people who are disadvantaged or excluded.

Our principles for the use of resources are based on our shared responsibility for mission and ministry as part of God's family, as set out in the Synod's policy for the use of resources (3). In that spirit we encourage our churches to be generous with one another so that our collective resources are focused on supporting the most disadvantaged in our region.

The vision which we want to create is of a network of local churches working not just for these communities but with the people in those communities who experience disadvantage to enable them to live their lives with dignity, agency, and power.

We want to encourage all of our churches to:

- Be integral to the life of the local community, listening actively to the views of local people, particularly those who are otherwise excluded
- See all people as made in the image of God, and working to support and develop local community leadership
- Walk with people in their communities in the most difficult of situations
- Use their resources to express the Gospel message of justice and compassion for all people in word and deed
- Foster a family of church and faith communities committed to work together to address issues of poverty and injustice in their locality
- Show generosity to one another, open to sharing and learning together
- Be intolerant of injustice and provide a prophetic challenge to secure the structural changes necessary to ensure that all can live with dignity, agency, and power.

As a Synod we will make opportunities available to all churches to be equipped to listen and respond to their local communities in ways consistent with these principles.

Our support for our member churches

Research by Church Action on Poverty (4) indicated that between 2010 and 2020 significantly more church closures had taken place in low-income communities. The report challenges denominations like the URC about how we focus our resources on continuing to serve those communities.

As a Synod we will prioritise resources to support those churches who are located in the areas of most significant deprivation. As well as funding, this will include access to Synod staff and resources. We will seek to prioritise the deployment of ministry (including CRCWs) to churches serving those communities. We will provide multi-year funding to enable churches to employ people working with local communities. We will advocate more widely within the URC for the prioritisation of resources (people, finance, and other resources) to support churches working with the most deprived communities.

Priority Churches

We will, in partnership with others, create a network of priority churches to which all churches located in the 10% most deprived communities (5) will be invited to become members. The churches who join the network will receive:

- Regular support, advice, and consultancy from the Synod Field Staff
- Access to resources to support communication with local communities
- Regular meetings to share and learn from other churches in the network
- Participation in consultation on the development of the programme of support including creation of communities of interest
- Priority access to the Church with people at the margins learning programme.
- Priority for grant funding to support community development activities.

The Synod and its Trust Company will work with network churches to develop arrangements that ensure the continued presence of church in these communities.

For all Churches

We recognise that the communities served by all our churches include groups of people who experience disadvantage and exclusion. We will continue to offer small grants to all churches working with partners on programmes to address issues of community exclusion and disadvantage. This will also be a priority for the use of our general grants programme. We will work with partners to develop training programmes accessible to all churches to support the development of mission and ministry consistent with the ambitions contained in this strategy.

Appendix: Dignity, agency, and power

Introduction

Dignity

For Christians, the centrality of human dignity is based on the foundational theological principle that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Poverty is not only deprivation of economic or material resources but, according to the United Nations, it is also fundamentally a violation of human dignity.

In the UK, poverty is strongly associated with public attitudes of stigma and blaming individuals for their own poverty. This has been described as the 'othering' of people living in poverty. In the words of Wayne Green, who spoke at the first National Poverty Hearing in 1996: *"What is poverty? Poverty is a battle of invisibility, a lack of resources, exclusion, powerlessness... being blamed for society's problems."*

Agency

As Christians we believe that all people are created with God given skills talents and free will, and this is intrinsic to what it is to be human. To have *agency* is to be able to make use of our talents, to make choices for ourselves, to 'have a voice.' However, there is a deep-seated prejudice that people in poverty lack intelligence or motivation to 'make good choices' and need to be 'rescued' from their poverty. In Church Action on Poverty's experience, people who live with poverty on a daily basis have powerful insights into the challenges they face, a deep understanding of what needs to change, and frequently the best ideas for doing so. Any attempts to tackle poverty which ignore the talents, ideas, and voices of people in poverty deny them their God' given agency. *'Nothing about us without us is for us'* must be our guiding principle.

Power

Christians frequently have a problem with the idea of power. It makes us uneasy. But there are more references to power in the Bible than to prayer.

Power is always present in all human situations. What makes power constructive or destructive is how it is used. People struggling against poverty frequently feel 'powerless,' and that their voice counts for nothing in wider society (and sometimes if we are honest, also in the church).

Martin Luther King challenges us to think differently: *"[Power is] the ability to achieve a purpose... It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change."*

If we are serious about transforming unjust structures, we have to find the courage to both to 'speak truth to power' ourselves, and more importantly, to find ways of enable people struggling against poverty to speak truth to power themselves.

Notes

1) Affordable housing

Homes let at least 20% below local market rents (affordable rental properties) or let at rates set between market rents and social rents (intermediate rental properties).
Homes England Fact Sheet 9: What is Affordable Housing: Available to Download here

2) NW Synod Principles for the use of resources

- that our priority is God's mission;
- that the strong should help the weak; and
- that we belong to each other under God.

3) Church Urban Fund Look up tool CUF Look Up Tool - CUF

4) Church on the Margins: A study of church closures in Greater Manchester between 2010 and 2020. Church Action on Poverty. Available for download from Church on the Margins - Church Action on Poverty (church-poverty.org.uk)

5) As defined by the Anglican Parish in which the church building is located determined with reference to the Church Urban Fund Loop up tool CUF Look Up Tool - CUF

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