

# Paper N1

## Church Life Review progress update

### Church Life Review

#### Basic information

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<b>Action required</b>	For information only.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None.</b>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To update Assembly on Church Life Review progress.
<b>Main points</b>	Church Life Review Phase Two (Design) continues to make progress towards fulfilling its terms of reference, which were set out by General Assembly 2023. There has been significant progress on each of the four workstreams (financial resource sharing, provision of shared support services, employment of lay workers, and new URC communities of worship and discipleship), with a focus on consultation. Next steps will focus on turning the outcomes of the four workstreams into proposals and Resolutions for the extraordinary session of General Assembly in November.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Paper N1, General Assembly 2024 Papers N1 and N2, General Assembly 2023 Resolutions 47-51a, General Assembly 2023.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	CLR Steering Group and sub-committee (and working groups on finance and new communities).  Attendees at CLR consultations in June 2024, November 2024, January 2025, and May 2025 (consisting of representatives from Synods, trusts, Church House, URC Trust, and others).

#### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	None.
<b>External (eg ecumenical)</b>	None.

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to update General Assembly on Church Life Review (CLR) progress since last July. The extraordinary session of General Assembly in November will be the formal end date for Phase Two (Design). Therefore, this paper does not bring any substantive proposals or resolutions. The full package of CLR proposals and resolutions will be put before Assembly in November.

## 2. CLR Phase Two recap

- 2.1. The CLR is currently in Phase Two (Design). This phase is intended to bring proposals to an extraordinary session of General Assembly in November 2025.
- 2.2. Phase Two was given terms of reference by General Assembly 2023, consisting of four workstreams: financial resource sharing (finance), provision of shared support services (services), employment of lay workers (lay workers), and new URC communities of worship and discipleship (new communities). An update on each of these four workstreams is included below. The resolutions which established these workstreams can be found in the 2023 Record of Assembly, Resolutions 47-51a, pp. 24-26: [www.urch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Record-of-Assembly-2023-web.pdf](http://www.urch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Record-of-Assembly-2023-web.pdf).
- 2.3. Phase Two is being guided by a Steering Group: Steve Faber (Convenor), Muna Levan-Harris, Romilly Micklem, Elizabeth Hall, Tim Hopley, Jan Adamson, and Lythan Nevard (John Bradbury, Myles Dunnett, and Ornella Mbula in attendance).
- 2.4. Phase Two is being overseen by a sub-committee of the Business Committee: John Bradbury (Convenor), Victoria James, Alan Yates, Sarah Moore, and Darnette Whitby-Reid (Myles Dunnett and Ornella Mbula in attendance).
- 2.5. The CLR core staffing team consists of a Programme Manager and Administrator.
- 2.6. The CLR is committed to being an open, inclusive, and collaborative process. Accordingly, significant emphasis has been placed on holding consultations, to allow varying communities of interest to contribute to and shape the CLR proposals. Consultations were held in June 2024 (first finance), November 2024 (shared services), January 2025 (new communities), and May 2025 (second finance).
- 2.7. The entire CLR is relentlessly focused on delivering for the URC's existing and future local church communities.

## 3. Vision, Mission, and Strategy Statement

- 3.1. The CLR Steering Group agreed a vision, mission, and strategy statement for the programme.
- 3.2. **Vision** (*the desired future state – 'tomorrow'*)  
A flourishing Church, less burdened, and better enabled.
- 3.3. **Mission** (*what we are doing currently to achieve the vision – 'today'*)  
To hold a space for discernment of where God is working and leading us, and enable collective action to support church communities, so that existing and new

URC communities can be freed to realise God's vision for them and develop their faith through evangelism, discipleship, and outreach.

### 3.4. **Strategy** *(a brief explanation of the programme's approach and objectives)*

Phase 1 laid the groundwork, leading to four workstreams looking at finance, employment, services, and new communities, each aimed at responding to an area of critical need with a medium-term focus.

Phase 2 is investigating, proposing, and guiding changes which will help the URC flourish into the future.

The concrete expression of this work is the proposed refocussing of the Church's financial resources and the creation of a substantial new shared fund, to collectively make best use of the denomination's resources and finance CLR activities in line with agreed values and principles.

By establishing a shared fund, the Church Life Review is seeking to:

- Design and fund new, collective shared services, including a denominational resources portal, to reduce burdens and better support church communities
- Pave the way for the establishment and resourcing of new URC communities of worship and discipleship
- Identify the best models of lay worker employment for local churches, and provide meaningful support for local churches who could not otherwise afford or manage lay workers.

After General Assembly in November 2025, Phase 3 will:

- Implement the outcomes of the four Phase 2 workstreams
- Collaboratively explore longer-term strategic questions as the denomination continues its journey
- Relentlessly focus on delivering for the URC's existing and future church communities.

## 4. **Progress on the four Phase Two workstreams**

### 4.1. **Finance**

The finance workstream responds to Resolutions 47 and 48 from General Assembly 2023, which set out the task, as well as values and principles for any proposals. After the first CLR finance consultation in June 2024, the Steering Group noted energy around the idea of creating a new shared fund to finance CLR proposals.

A decision was made to establish a Finance Working Group (FWG). Members of the FWG were: Romilly Micklem, Faith Paulding, Chris Atherton, John Denison, and Catriona Wheeler; the FWG was Co-Chaired by Alan Yates and Myles Dunnett. The FWG were asked to report to the CLR Steering Group. The FWG had a series of conversations exploring variants, comparators, and alternatives, and subsequently produced a proposal which was sent to Synods in January 2025.

The next step is a consultation with Synod Moderators, Treasurers, and Trust Convenors, taking place on 16 May at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine in Limehouse. The purpose of this consultation is to hold a space for discussion and review of the proposal, explore governance questions, and agree a way forward. Work after 16 May will include reviewing and incorporating outcomes from the

consultation, assessing and modelling the scale of the fund (and implications on capacity), and further refining the proposal in advance of General Assembly in November. The hope is to come to the Assembly in November with a proposal which is agreed by Synods and trusts, with a comprehensive understanding of the likely scale of the new shared fund. The Steering Group are clear that the viability of the other three workstreams and subsequent proposals depends on the establishment of a CLR shared fund.

Please note that the Proposal to Establish a CLR Shared Fund is available on request, but has not been attached as an appendix due to the likelihood of changes being made between the time of writing this paper and General Assembly in July, as well as to avoid pre-empting the proposal being formally brought before Assembly in November.

The financial resource sharing workstream is appropriately viewed as an enabling workstream. The proposals that will come before General Assembly in November will outline that the outcome of the finance workstream, ie the proposal to establish a CLR shared fund, is the concrete enabling mechanism through which the proposals from the other three workstreams can be financed.

## 4.2. **Shared services**

This workstream consists of two pieces of work, responding to Resolutions 49 and 50 from General Assembly 2023:

- a) Establishment of a shared resources portal for the entire denomination
- b) Design of collective shared services beyond the resources portal.

A CLR Shared Services Consultation took place in November 2024 in Milton Keynes. Out of this consultation, we emerged with a high-level operating model for the resources portal, as well as a list of shared service areas to explore beyond the portal. It has been acknowledged that some style of support function (eg a helpdesk) for the portal would be a major benefit to users, to contextualise resources and provide advice. The possibility of a support function is being modelled, and is dependent on the capacity of the eventual shared fund.

A small working group, including a member of the CLR Steering Group and staff from the Administration and Resources team, is working on the design of the portal, with a plan to operationalise an initial version with a first tranche of resources before November.

Additional work is being undertaken to design other shared services, including IT, HR, payroll, accounting support for local churches, and a procurement/buying solution. The CLR is also monitoring a living lab in North Western Synod, exploring the usefulness of, and calls upon, a helpdesk for local churches (the results of which will be relevant to the resources portal support function).

## 4.3. **Lay worker employment**

This workstream responds to Resolution 51 from General Assembly 2023. Previous work on the employment workstream includes counsel's opinion on appropriate employment arrangements for lay workers in local churches, with regard to employing entities.

The CLR Steering Group decided to engage Eido, a faith-based research organisation, to undertake eight case studies exploring different models of lay worker employment across the denomination, including lay workers employed directly by local churches, and lay workers employed by Synods on behalf of local churches. Interim findings from this study are highly encouraging, and will form a core part of the lay worker recommendations. The full report will be brought before Assembly in November.

The CLR Steering Group will also seek a second legal opinion, exploring specific implications of different models of employment.

#### 4.4. **New communities of worship and discipleship**

This workstream responds to Resolution 51a from General Assembly 2023.

The 'Conversations at the Crossroads' consultation in January was an opportunity for a diverse group of 'Mission and Discipleship Animators' to consider opportunities for new communities of discipleship and worship in the URC. We emerged from the consultation with a list of outcomes and themes, which will be refined and expanded into a blueprint for the establishment of new communities.

Following the consultation, the planning group, in conjunction with the CLR Steering Group, decided to establish a CLR New Communities Working Group (NCWG) to take the work forward. The NCWG members are: Steve Faber (Convenor), Nicola Furley-Smith, Ruth Maxey, Lindsey Brown, Sarah Moore, Muna Levan-Harris, and Myles Dunnett (Ornella Mbula in attendance). The group will have discussions and consult as widely as necessary to produce a proposal for the CLR Steering Group and others. Care will be taken to ensure that the new communities proposal responds to a number of priorities set by General Assembly, including anti-racism, net zero, and areas of poverty and deprivation. The proposal will be a permissive rather than restrictive document, intended to inform both funding decisions and the development of church communities on the ground.

#### 5. **Path to General Assembly in November and beyond**

5.1. The outcomes of the work discussed in section four will be written up as papers and resolutions for the extraordinary CLR session of General Assembly in November.

5.2. The CLR Steering Group and Business Committee will begin planning for General Assembly in November. It is currently expected that the November Assembly will have three parts: a presentation of the overall package of proposals, business to consider the resolutions, and finally a facilitated session to consider longer-term questions. This is subject to revision and confirmation.

5.3. It is important to note that the four Phase Two workstreams have a primarily medium-term focus, with the exception of the new communities workstream. On the basis that these four workstreams respond to more urgent areas of need, the Steering Group will also spend some time considering longer-term strategic questions. One option is to propose that CLR Phase Three could simultaneously implement outcomes of the four Phase Two workstreams *and* hold space for consideration of the longer-term questions facing the denomination through a new workstream(s). This conversation is ongoing, and all proposals for Phase Three will be brought before Assembly in November.

- 5.4. It has been noted that one of the most helpful aspects of the CLR process has been the creation of spaces for Synods, trusts, and others to meet and consider challenges facing the church in an open, safe, structured, and strategic way. It is hoped that this way of working, modelled by CLR phases one and two, will be carried through into phase three and beyond, and will eventually be embedded throughout the councils of the Church.
- 5.5. As the likely scale of the shared fund becomes known, work will be done to work-up costings and estimates. The Steering Group have acknowledged a 'chicken and egg' challenge related to the ordering of assessing the scale of the fund and assessing the scale of ambition/capacity. The CLR shared fund is currently expected to be apportioned roughly in thirds across the shared services, lay worker, and new communities funding streams. With the lay worker and new communities funding streams in particular (and less so with the shared services workstream), it is expected that the CLR shared funds will be dispensed like grants, with funding decisions made in accordance with criteria which will be shaped based on the outcomes of the relevant workstream. More information about the specific mechanism for funding decisions, as well as governance, support in making applications, and other technicalities, will be brought before Assembly in November.
- 5.6. Any questions or comments about the Church Life Review can be sent directly to the CLR inbox, **[churchlifereview@urc.org.uk](mailto:churchlifereview@urc.org.uk)**, where they will be passed onto the Programme Manager Steering Group for consideration. To arrange a discussion with the Programme Manager, please contact Ornella Mbula: **[ornella.mbula@urc.org.uk](mailto:ornella.mbula@urc.org.uk)**.