

Synod Moderators' report

Moderators' Meeting

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Geoffrey Clarke mod@urc5.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 encourage us to be a people 'full of grace' and to challenge us to be counter-cultural in practising grace and gratitude in a context of the famine of grace.
Main points	<p>As a Church we give thanks for the grace glimpsed and experienced through faith in Christ.</p> <p>As local churches and individuals we are vessels of grace but we can conclude that there is a 'famine of grace' in the world around us, with abuse and contempt being the more dominant presence.</p> <p>We are called to rejoice in what God's grace enables among us and to embody that grace in how we treat one another, encouraging and practising gratitude.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Previous Synod Moderators' reports.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	Ecumenical partners are welcome to engage with the report.

Welcome to the 2025 Moderators' report

For this year we are taking grace as our theme.

1. Grace is both elementary and amazing: elementary in that it is such a key word for us, as followers of Jesus, that we risk taking it for granted to the point of not noticing it; yet also amazing in that it is undeserved, ever new and surprising. As the Statement Concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church puts it:

Synod Moderators' report

*The life of faith to which we are called is the Spirit's gift,
continually received through the Word and Sacraments
and our Christian life together.*

To which we respond:

*We acknowledge the gift and answer the call,
giving thanks for the means of grace.*

2. As disciples of Jesus, we are both recipients of grace and bearers of grace. When Mary enters her house, Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb and she is filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41, 44). Mary's presence, as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), is such that in their encounter Elizabeth catches a glimpse of grace. She knows herself to be in the presence of grace. She addresses Mary and says, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb' (Luke 1:42). Elizabeth's words have been immortalised in the ancient prayer, 'Hail Mary', treasured by many of our sisters and brothers across the world. Members of General Assembly may be surprised to see it quoted in a Synod Moderators' report, but the phrase 'full of grace', bestowed on Mary, is one, it could be suggested, that could be used to describe the Church and each member of it: we are the company of those who are full of grace. Just as Elizabeth caught a glimpse of grace through her encounter with Mary so, too, there is potential for us to experience God's grace every time we come together as those who are full of grace.
3. It is one of the privileges of our role as Moderators to visit the many local churches in our respective Synods. The purpose of our visits can be varied – to lead worship and preach; to preside at services of induction, ordination or commissioning; to come alongside ministers, elders and members to discern the way ahead for ministry and mission; or to respond pastorally in times of joy and challenge. In each, we treasure the privilege of being a bearer of grace; and in each place we recognise the potential for the presence of grace through our encounters and through our shared commitment to discern the mind of Christ through conversation. Each local church is distinct, yet each are vessels full of grace. Here are some examples:
 - In Hinckley, grace has been embodied in a church working in partnership with the charity, Hope into Action, to enable a homeless person to become a tenant.
 - Morningside United Church (MUC) is the host church for the Romanian Orthodox congregation in Edinburgh. Last year there was a major celebration for the Orthodox community and so rather than them gathering for worship on a Sunday afternoon as usual, the congregation of MUC offered the Orthodox community the use of the whole building for the day and then they went to worship at Christchurch Scottish Episcopal Church across the road as well as taking part in the Orthodox celebrations.
 - As Eastern Synod moves, as a Synod, into Mission Partnerships – a new way of working together – grace has been glimpsed when churches have said, 'when a new minister comes the needs of church 'X' are more urgent than ours so we happy to allow them more of the minister's time.'
 - An article in the church magazine at Hadleigh, by the Church Secretary, expressing thankfulness for how people have come together in a time of vacancy and have hope for a future which might be different from that which they might have envisaged (especially as they had a minister to themselves before) and that they approach the vacancy with glad hearts.

Synod Moderators' report

4. It is all too easy to conclude that grace is in short supply in the world at large. Some have spoken of 'the famine of grace'. There is no shortage of instances, on a daily basis, of people reacting to one another with abuse and contempt – both in tone and in their choice of vocabulary – and belittling those with whom they disagree or take issue. Social media can be testimony to the famine of grace.
5. Church ought, by contrast, to be different. It ought to be full of grace. No church can claim to be perfect – not least because every church is made up of ordinary, fallible human beings. We do not always get it right when it comes to answering the call of God and responding faithfully. Whilst we might wish it were otherwise, despite being full of grace, sometimes how we react to one another displays a distinct lack of grace. This might be seen, for example, in how we treat one another in our meetings and address one another in writing: just two common examples of how easily we fall from grace back into sinful behaviour and attitudes. Synod Moderators are also fallible human beings and are among those who witness, or have to address, poor behaviour and conduct. Often it can be a lack of grace that has exacerbated a situation. Nobody expects everyone to agree on everything or to live in perfect harmony. But how we react and respond to conflict and disagreement is part of our witness as those who are full of grace.
6. So how and when are we – as individuals and as churches – known as those who are full of grace? One suggestion, seen in Elizabeth's Holy Spirit-filled joy through her encounter with Mary, is through a shared joy in what God is doing in our lives. God has made possible, in their lives, more than they could have imagined or hoped for. Both Mary and Elizabeth discern God at work in the life of the other. Church at its best is a people who discern God at work in and through one another's lives – accomplishing in and through us what we might have concluded impossible.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:22-23 calls the church to celebrate and recognise the grace shown through the less honourable parts of the body, not just the presentable parts. How often do we recognise and celebrate grace in the other?

*Surprised by grace, these mothers hold
Within themselves the secret fierce
Of God's true power to love his world;
All wrong to heal, pretence to pierce. ⁽¹⁾*

7. Gratitude is another powerful antidote to the famine of grace. It is a very natural human tendency to complain when things are not as we feel they should be or when we feel we have not received the service we deserve. By contrast we may not as readily articulate appreciation and gratitude when we have positive and enriching experiences. As those full of grace that is undeserved, we ought to be able to cultivate and encourage expressions and gestures of gratitude – going the extra mile to show appreciation and thanksgiving. Gratitude blesses recipients and transforms those bestowing it. It is the privilege of being Moderators that we see thankfulness being lived out, whether in the presentation of the Lundie Award to a young person or a certificate of thanks for many years of active service in ministry to a retired or still-serving minister. Each of the 13 Moderators would like to express our gratitude and thanks to the many hundreds of individuals who make the Synods what they are. Thank you.

Synod Moderators' report

*Suffused with grace, their meeting glows
With radiance as Christ moves to earth.
His welcomed presence strengthens, grows
And changes she who gives him birth.¹*

8. Ultimately, those who are full of grace acknowledge that it is all about God. The boundless generosity and mercy of God are our focus. Elizabeth and Mary discern God at work in one another's lives. Mary responds with her song of praise – magnifying the One who has done great things for her: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.' (Luke 1:46-48a).

*'Be born in us today' we've said
At every Christmas Eve and Day.
To cradle grace in heart and head:
Infused with grace, for grace we pray.*

*By this new grace reborn, may we
Become his ministers of worth,
Our being, purpose, clear to see:
Diffusing grace, share Christ on earth.¹*

9. We delight in serving those who are full of grace and encourage the United Reformed Church in playing its part in diffusing grace sharing the full spectrum of God's love and light in the communities which we are called to serve.

Personalia

This year we have seen the arrival of the Revd David Downing as the Moderator of South Western Synod. This is an appointment that completes the Moderators' Meeting for the first time in a long while. We give thanks for David's answer to the call upon him and we pray he may exhibit both grace and joy as he continues to serve God and the Synod in the south west.

Questions for discussion

1. Where and in whom did we most recently catch a glimpse of grace, and did we remember to give thanks for that grace observed?
2. What opportunities are there in our local church for discerning God at work in one another's lives?
3. How is gratitude encouraged and practised in the regular life of our local church?
4. To what extent do we diffuse grace in the context of a famine of grace?

¹ Rosemary Field, hymn written for the ordination of Simon Cross, August 2024. Suggested tune: Tallis's Canon. Copyright and permission for wider use: rosemaryfield@rmfield.co.uk