

Paper A1

Church Life Review Extraordinary

General Assembly introductory paper

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Myles Dunnett, Programme Manager, Church Life Review myles.dunnett@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 1a General Assembly receives the package of Church Life Review (CLR) proposals and notes that they are the product of extensive consultation across the councils of the Church. Assembly extends its thanks to the wide range of people who have engaged and contributed to the process. Resolution 1b Assembly acknowledges the extraordinary and different nature of this Assembly, and its place in the wider process of change. Assembly commits to consider the proposals in light of this significant Kairos moment. Resolution 2 Based on learnings from the Church Life Review's methodology, General Assembly commits to a denominational intention to continue ad hoc consultations, to allow relevant people from across the councils of the Church to collaborate and discern the future of the denomination together, addressing challenging strategic questions in well-facilitated, safe, honest spaces. Resolution 3 Based on learnings from the Church Life Review process and beyond, General Assembly commits to a way of working where resources and services are denominationally developed and locally delivered. Resolution 4 General Assembly instructs the Business, Faith in Action, Ministries, and Resources Committees to consider their collection, analysis, and usage of data, and to reflect on how data could enhance their decision-making.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To frame the Extraordinary General Assembly by recapping CLR scriptural basis, context, history, aims, and methodology, considering lessons learned, and explaining the overall structure of the proposals.
Main points	Executive Summary This paper introduces the Church Life Review Phase Two proposals, setting them in context and affirming the consultative process behind them. It asks Assembly to receive the proposals as a Spirit-led response to present challenges and to recognise this extraordinary session as a decisive moment for the denomination. The paper seeks to commit the URC to ongoing collaborative discernment, data-informed decision-making, and a model where denominational resources and services are developed collectively but delivered locally.
Previous relevant documents	All the papers brought before this Assembly respond in some way to the following Church Life Review papers (omitting Church Life Review papers which dealt primarily with matters related to committee structures): • Paper N2, Assembly Executive 2021 • Paper N1, Assembly Executive 2022 • Paper N1, General Assembly 2022 • Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 • Paper N1, General Assembly 2024 • Paper N1, General Assembly 2025
Consultation has taken place with...	Over the course of the CLR process, a wide array of stakeholders have been consulted on a range of different issues. Those consulted include: the CLR Steering Group (and its Finance/New Communities Working Group); CLR Sub-Committee; Business Committee; Resources Committee; Ministries Committee; Mission Committee; URC Trust; Youth Executive; Worship, Faith and Order Committee; Offices of General Assembly staff; Senior Leadership Team; synod and trust company officers, trustees, staff, and volunteers; attendees at four consultations; local church representatives via denominational communications, workshops, and meetings; and ecumenical partners (particularly the Methodist Church and the Church of England). Ad hoc consultations and conversations have also taken place with a number of other formal and informal groups, including the Church Buildings Forum, Special Category Ministers, Law and Polity Advisory Group (now known as the Law and Polity Reference Group), those engaged in work to address poverty and deprivation, external service providers, and others. Significant efforts have been made to engage with as wide a cohort of people as possible, from commissioned/ordained ministers, to lay members, to officers and staff.

Summary of impact

Financial	See Papers A2 and A11.
External (eg ecumenical)	Consultation with ecumenical partners has been integral to the process.

1. Church Life Review vision and mission

- 1.1. As we gather for this extraordinary General Assembly, it is important to first set out the Church Life Review (CLR) vision and mission.
- 1.2. The CLR Steering Group endorses the following vision and mission statements. The vision is an aspirational statement about ‘tomorrow’ – a view of the future that all the proposals brought before Assembly seek to move us towards. The mission is a statement about our way of working in Phase Two, in order to help achieve our vision.
- 1.3. **Vision:** A flourishing church, less burdened and better enabled.
- 1.4. **Mission:** 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.
- 1.5. The entire CLR is relentlessly focused on delivering for the URC’s existing and future local church communities.

2. Scriptural basis

- 2.1. The CLR is driven by the Gospel imperative and informed by scripture. All consultations and meetings have included worship and space for prayerful discernment of where God is leading the Church.

The following scripture from Jeremiah has been repeatedly cited as underpinning the CLR vision. Jeremiah 29:5-7: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

- 2.2. This passage finds Jeremiah offering some much-needed advice to the exiles in Babylon, who find themselves under imperial rule far from home. In his letter, Jeremiah does not deny that the exiles will be in Babylon for the long-haul, but advises against despair: God has not forgotten them. Instead, Jeremiah encourages the exiles to place their hope in God and work to change their circumstances; in other words, to get on with life. Later on in his letter, Jeremiah tells the exiles that the Lord says he has “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).
- 2.3. Jeremiah has plenty of advice for the URC in this moment: we need to take a long-term view; we need to collectively use our resources to metaphorically build houses and plant gardens so that the church might flourish; we need to

listen to God's voice amidst this change and uncertainty; ultimately, we must have faith in God's Sovereign plan for us. Jeremiah reminds God's people that things are not perfect, and we should not passively wait for them to get better. Instead, we should get on with life and invest in what we have now.

- 2.4. Some of the following papers are very technical. This reflects the complexity of the topics covered, which require nuance and detail. Sometimes technical language can seem corporate, and at odds with our understanding of church as the Body of Christ. Yet the Church is also an organisation, represented by numerous legal entities with legal obligations. It is a theological imperative that we faithfully fulfil these obligations and support our members in doing so.
- 2.5. These papers collectively represent a continuing effort of renewal in the life of the Church. Renewal is not simply about pursuing a process of strategic change, nor is it a run-to-completion task. Renewal in our Reformed theology is a Spirit-led process of discernment, through which we do what we can collectively to equip our local churches to live into their calling in the modern world, and deepen our rootedness in the Gospel. Renewal is not a matter of reinvention – it is about refreshment, so that the Church can flourish where it is already deeply rooted, and where it may yet be planted. That spirit of renewal is deeply part of the URC's history and ethos.

3. Church Life Review Phase One: exploring big questions

- 3.1. The context of the CLR will be familiar to many. Across Western Europe and beyond, Christian denominations have seen several decades of decline in membership, particularly since World War Two. The age demographic of churches has simultaneously been trending upward. There are tentative signs that this may be slowing in some quarters, but the overall trend has been one of significant reduction in capacity.
- 3.2. Simultaneously, the regulatory environment has grown more complex, with significantly greater demands on local churches. In the UK, Charity Commission guidelines have grown considerably more onerous, and the legislation churches must comply with has grown harder to navigate.
- 3.3. In the URC, there are specific denominational challenges on top of these macro trends. Many of the Church's structures are unchanged since the passing of the original URC Act in 1972. There is a significant deficit in the Ministry & Mission (M&M) budget. As membership declines, churches close and buildings are sold. The long-term risk is that assets will accrue while membership declines.
- 3.4. The confluence of these issues has led to a situation where local churches are overwhelmed, overburdened, and in many cases unable to fully focus on the core work of being Church – participating in God's mission, ministering to God's people, nurturing the spiritual life of the community, and bearing witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. This local church problem is the core situation the CLR has sought to address.
- 3.5. The Covid-19 pandemic brought all these issues, and many others, into sharp focus. The CLR subsequently commenced in 2021, with a sense that this was a Kairos moment – an opportune moment given to us by God, in which we need to take decisive action.

- 3.6. CLR Phase One set out to review the whole life of the Church, with an aim to understand the key drivers for the challenges faced by local churches. The key aim was to draw together a coherent package of work. Key outputs included the Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads report from Theos and the MKS forensic accountancy study. A large consultation was also held at Yarnfield Park.
- 3.7. The outcomes of CLR Phase One led to the establishment of CLR Phase Two at General Assembly in 2023.

4. CLR Phase Two (Design): programme details

- 4.1. This Assembly marks the delivery of CLR Phase Two (Design). Phase two was tasked with undertaking investigations and bringing proposals to this extraordinary session of General Assembly. All of the papers brought before Assembly therefore reflect the outcomes of CLR Phase Two (Design).
- 4.2. Phase Two was initiated by General Assembly 2023, which gave it terms of reference 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). The Resolutions which established these workstreams can be found in the 2023 Record of Assembly, Resolutions 47–51a, pp. 24–26, www.urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Record-of-Assembly-2023-web.pdf
Also available at <http://bit.ly/48U3cHv>
- 4.3. The 2023 Resolutions refer to ‘task groups’. Due to the time commitment and complexity of the roles, recruiting to these task groups was unsuccessful. Business Committee therefore decided to form a Steering Group, comprised of seven people with interest in all four of the programme workstreams.
- 4.4. Phase Two has been guided by the Steering Group, whose members generously contributed their gifts and graces: Revd Steve Faber (Convenor), Ms Muna Levan-Harris, Revd Dr Romilly Micklem, Ms Elizabeth Hall, Mr Tim Hopley, Revd Jan Adamson, and Revd Lythan Nevard. Revd Dr John Bradbury, Mr Myles Dunnett, and Ms Ornella Mbula attended meetings.
- 4.5. Phase Two was overseen by a Sub-Committee of the Business Committee: Revd Dr John Bradbury (Convenor), Ms Victoria James, Mr Alan Yates, Revd Sarah Moore, and Ms Darnette Whitby-Reid. Mr Myles Dunnett and Ms Ornella Mbula attended meetings.
- 4.6. The CLR core staff team consists of Mr Myles Dunnett, the Programme Manager, and Ms Ornella Mbula, the CLR Administrator.
- 4.7. The programme and associated costs (including the development of the resources hub) were covered by a designated fund within the URC Trust.
- 4.8. The Steering Group have made efforts to communicate the process, progress, and proposals to the wider Church. An example of the Phase Two communications material is included in Appendix One.

5. Method of working

- 5.1. In line with the URC's conciliar polity and ethos, the CLR has committed to a consultative, collaborative, transparent approach.
- 5.2. Inevitably, we have not heard from every member of the Church. We have, however, been able to bring together relevant groups of people, particularly from synods and trusts, to consider difficult strategic questions in a way that has not happened before. We hope this marks the start of a shift in culture: from 14 (and indeed, many more) different ways of doing things, to actively seeking opportunities for collective ways of working. Intentional collaboration between the Northerly synods demonstrates the benefits of this model.
- 5.3. Phase Two has included four significant consultations. These consultations have been important opportunities to discern together, and the outcomes have significantly shaped and informed the development of key proposals.
- 5.4. In June 2024, synod officers, trustees, and other key leadership/finance representatives gathered in Bloomsbury to consider options for more effective financial resource sharing. This consultation, facilitated by Dr Gordon Woods, narrowed down options, with a new shared fund emerging as the most popular. The Steering Group decided that this work should subsequently be taken up by a Finance Working Group.
- 5.5. In November, representatives met for 24 hours at Kents Hill Park to think about which shared services might be developed to support local churches. Dr Gordon Woods helped attendees consider a key question: what things are we currently doing separately, which we might better do together? We emerged from this with a high-level operating model for the shared resources hub, as well as a list of services to explore beyond the resources hub, including HR, IT, payroll, accounting, and group buying.
- 5.6. In January 2025, we brought together a diverse group of Mission and Discipleship Animators for Conversations at the Crossroads, to think about how we might invest strategically in developing new communities of discipleship and worship. Dr Nigel Pimlott facilitated the conversations, and we emerged with a set of themes and outcomes, which formed the basis of subsequent values and principles. The Steering Group and Planning Group decided that, following the success of the Finance Working Group model, a New Communities Working Group should take these outcomes forward.
- 5.7. In May 2025, we gathered at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine for a second finance consultation, the last of CLR Phase Two, to consider the proposal to establish a Church Life Fund, the outcomes of which contributed to Paper A2. Dr Gordon Woods generously facilitated the consultation.
- 5.8. Alongside all these consultations, the Steering Group, along with its Finance Working Group and New Communities Working Group, focused on all four workstreams, sought to discern where the URC should focus its efforts, and ensured we had the necessary outcomes to bring these proposals before Assembly.
- 5.9. Some examples of the outcomes from the four consultations are included in Appendix Two.

- 5.10. The Steering Group have also been conscious of differing requirements (and increasingly divergent) legal frameworks between England, Scotland, and Wales. As with any denominational work, resources must be adapted to suit each of the three nations. This is another key reason that consultation has been essential.

6. Lessons learned

- 6.1. The CLR programme has been a rich opportunity for experimentation and learning, both about responses to key strategic challenges and ways of working together as a denomination. The points below relate to general learnings across all four workstreams.
- 6.2. There is a lack of good, comprehensive data across the denomination. In the absence of this data, key decisions, particularly those related to finance, may not always be taken with a full understanding of the context. The MKS forensic accountancy study undertaken as part of CLR Phase One was an imperfect attempt to understand the scale and spread of wealth in the URC, but even this was based on an incomplete and inconsistent dataset. Similarly, it is hard to say with any accuracy (beyond anecdotal assessments) what the rate of membership decline and church closure has been historically, and might be in the future. This paucity of good data has been noted in other areas of church life – most recently in education and learning, as discussed at length in Paper ADH1 from General Assembly in July 2025. The URC needs to urgently address its data collection, analysis, and application, ensuring that we are collecting the right data, interpreting it correctly, and taking appropriate action. We should not collect data for the sake of fulfilling a process – it must be put to the use of furthering and enhancing the work of the church. There is significant opportunity for ecumenical learning, particularly from the Church of England, whose focus on data collection has greatly enhanced their strategic decision-making.
- 6.3. There is significant duplication across all councils of the church in most, if not every, aspect of church life. Many synods are maintaining their own versions of documents which could easily be standardised – the resource hub is an effort to address this. Some synods are providing services which their local churches find highly useful, whilst in other synods these services are not available. For example, at least two synods' treasurers/finance staff offer a bookkeeping service to a handful of local churches who struggle with their accounts. Other synod treasurers would not be able to offer this service, due to capacity or any number of other factors. Better coordination would reduce duplication, improve accessibility, and increase collaboration, ensuring the provision of better, more coherent, more widely available services, documents, and advice. There is also the potential for significant savings, through the creation of economies of scale. As the URC moves towards a more collaborative way of providing for churches, capacity will also improve, freeing synod officers and staff for other work.
- 6.4. Clarity of vision, mission, and strategy is critical. Without first defining a vision, finding ways to achieve this with a mission, and setting a clear strategy, worthwhile initiatives can experience strategic drift, mission creep, or outright failure. A key way to address these issues is through intentionality – setting out to achieve particular aims in particular ways, without being inflexible or resistant to emergent change.

- 6.5. There is little point in trying to sustain or revive systems which are not working well. In many cases in church life, it is worth 'having a go' at doing something new in a spirit of innovation, permissiveness, and experimentation. This does not mean changing everything – just being open to doing things in different ways.
- 6.6. The CLR consultations have revealed a significant gap in the URC's collective life: there has not been a forum for key people to come together and address questions like shared services, new communities, and financial resource sharing in strategic, structured, and safe ways. General Assembly is unlikely to be an effective forum for the continuation of these sorts of consultations. Good process can itself be formative, encouraging new cultural norms in how we come together to address important questions. It is therefore suggested that these issue-specific consultations continue, with a denominational commitment to working in this way.
- 6.7. Church Life Review Phase Two has been tightly focussed on the four workstreams given to it by General Assembly 2023. These four workstreams have a generally medium-term focus, notwithstanding the hope that many of the new communities of discipleship and worship will have a long-term future. Given the limited scope of enquiry in Phase Two, the CLR does not – and indeed, could not – answer every question the denomination faces. Paper A10 sets out some of these strategic questions, which will be considered as part of a consultative session at the end of this Assembly. It is suggested that strategic, long-term thinking becomes more embedded in the life of the denomination across all councils of the church.

7. Excursus on living labs

- 7.1. At the outset of CLR Phase Two in March 2024, there was an ambition to develop a portfolio of 'living labs'. These were to be on-the-ground trials of new ways of working, funded from the CLR programme budget. Of three attempted living labs, only one was successful. This is partly because the Steering Group decided to deprioritise the living lab approach in favour of a more consultative methodology – but this is not the only reason an alternative approach was favoured.
- 7.2. In reality, establishing living labs was challenging. Acknowledging that the living lab approach was not working as intended, the Steering Group chose instead to focus CLR programme time and resource on structured, facilitated consultations exploring challenging, strategic questions. These consultations fit well with the URC's conciliar polity and proved highly productive. As discussed above, outputs from the consultations were instrumental in shaping the whole package of proposals brought before this Assembly. The whole CLR portfolio of proposals is the result of a collaborative journey. We are immensely grateful to all who have contributed for their time, insight, and wisdom.
- 7.3. One key learning is that living labs and similar GA/synod-level projects are entirely dependent on the capacity of individual synods, and specifically synod officers and staff. Living labs and other trial models require substantial projects to be agreed, established, and delivered at pace. One living lab was successfully delivered, trialing a helpdesk for local churches in North Western Synod. This succeeded because Mr Tim Hopley, the Synod Clerk, was a member of the CLR Steering Group, so was already generously dedicating

time to the Church Life Review. The synod also had the staff capacity needed to deliver the work. Attempts were made to establish two additional living labs (one focused on accounting support for local churches, and the other trialling a parish clerk-style lay worker role) but neither came to fruition due to limited capacity within the relevant synods.

- 7.4. It is important to note that synods, along with local churches, are often overburdened. A key element in the Steering Group's thinking, particularly in relation to shared services, is that CLR proposals should not have a deleterious impact on synod capacity. We cannot, in an effort to reduce the burden on local churches, shift the whole burden onto synods. Doing so risks causing further problems in the future.

8. Overview of proposals brought before Assembly

- 8.1. All the papers brought before this Assembly represent the outcomes of Church Life Review Phase Two (Design) and its four workstreams, represented by Resolutions 47–51a from General Assembly 2023, which effectively set out Phase Two's Terms of Reference.
- 8.2. All papers are brought by Business Committee, as the Church Life Review has officially been within the Committee's remit. The Steering Group has played a pivotal role in overseeing the work underlying these papers.
- 8.3. We appreciate that many of the papers are long, dense, and technical. The workstreams have raised complex issues, which need to be addressed at length, and which demand nuanced answers. It is important to remember that the papers are not the processes they propose. The reality of the Church Life Fund's operation will be as streamlined as possible, to ensure accessibility and user-friendliness.
- 8.4. The papers brought before this Assembly are as follows:

Paper	Purpose	Workstream	Notes
A2	Proposal to establish a Church Life Fund	Financial resource sharing	This paper will be presented first, as all subsequent proposals depend on there being a shared funding source to provide resource.
A3	Plans for a denominational shared resources hub and helpdesk	Provision of shared support services	
A4	Proposal to develop an accounting service	Provision of shared support services	
A5	Potential options for a group buying scheme	Provision of shared support services	
A6	HR, IT, payroll, and property shared services	Provision of shared support services	

A7	Lay worker case study report by Eido Research	Employment of lay workers	This paper was prepared by Eido, an external research agency, who undertook eight case studies looking at different types of lay worker employment in the URC.
A8	Employment of lay workers	Employment of lay workers	This paper follows A7, and proposes to fund new lay worker roles through the Church Life Fund.
A9	New communities of worship and discipleship proposal	New communities of discipleship and worship	This paper was prepared by the New Communities Working Group, who took forward outcomes from the <i>Conversations at the Crossroads</i> consultation on behalf of the CLR Steering Group. The paper proposes to fund new communities through the Church Life Fund.
A10	End of CLR & facilitated sessions (long-term strategic questions)	N/A	This paper acknowledges the conclusion of CLR Phase Two, and with it the CLR programme. The paper sets out key long-term strategic questions facing the Church, which will be discussed in the facilitated sessions.
A11	Size and scale of the Church Life fund	Financial resource sharing	This paper was deliberately brought late, following the decisions of Synod Meetings in October.

9. Glossary

9.1. A number of initialisms are used throughout these papers, as follows:

- Church Life Review – CLR
- Church Life Fund – CLF
- Church Life Fund Committee – CLFC
- United Reformed Church Trust – URCT
- Inter-Synod Resource Sharing – ISRS
- Resource Sharing Task Group – RSTG.

Appendix One: CLR Communications Material Example

Comic Panel 1: A man is struggling with bookkeeping at 'HIGH STREET ACCOUNTANTS'. A woman offers 'CLR SUPPORT'.
Caption: Struggling with bookkeeping and need help?

Comic Panel 2: A man is looking for a 'LAY WORKER' but lacks confidence or funds. A woman offers 'CHURCH LIFE FUND' support.
Caption: Lacking confidence or funds to hire a family worker?

Comic Panel 3: A woman is confused about where to start with Health and Safety. A man offers 'URC SHARED RESOURCE HUB' support.
Caption: Where do I start with Health and Safety?

Comic Panel 4: A man sees a spiritual need in an under-served estate and applies to the 'CHURCH LIFE FUND'. A woman offers support.
Caption: New URC worshipping community established!

Comic Panel 5: A man is overwhelmed with church burdens (BUYING, ACCOUNTS, HR). A woman offers 'FUNDING BY CLR' support.
Caption: Attending a church overwhelmed with burdens?

Comic Panel 6: A man is attending a church overwhelmed with burdens. A woman offers 'WELCOME!' support.
Caption: Attending a church overwhelmed with burdens?

QR Code: A QR code linking to the Church Life Fund resources.

Text: Here are some of the things a new Church Life Fund could do to help your church

Logo: The United Reformed Church Church Life Review

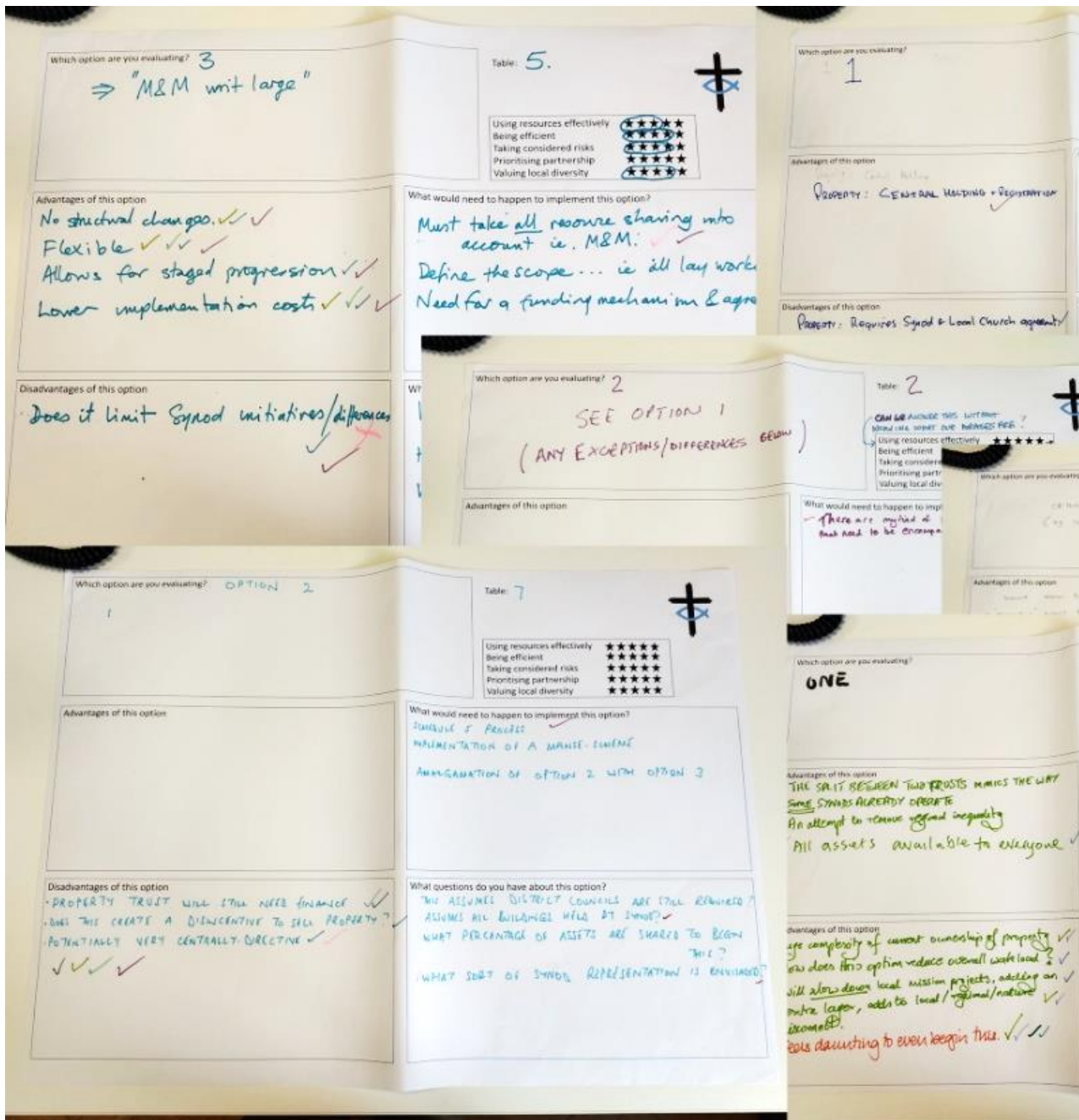
Website: www.urc.org.uk

Social Media: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media icons.

Text: The Church Life Review will be proposing important changes at General Assembly in November

Mailing to all churches, September 2025

Appendix Two: Consultation Outcomes



Options analysis collage, June 2024, Financial Resource Sharing Consultation

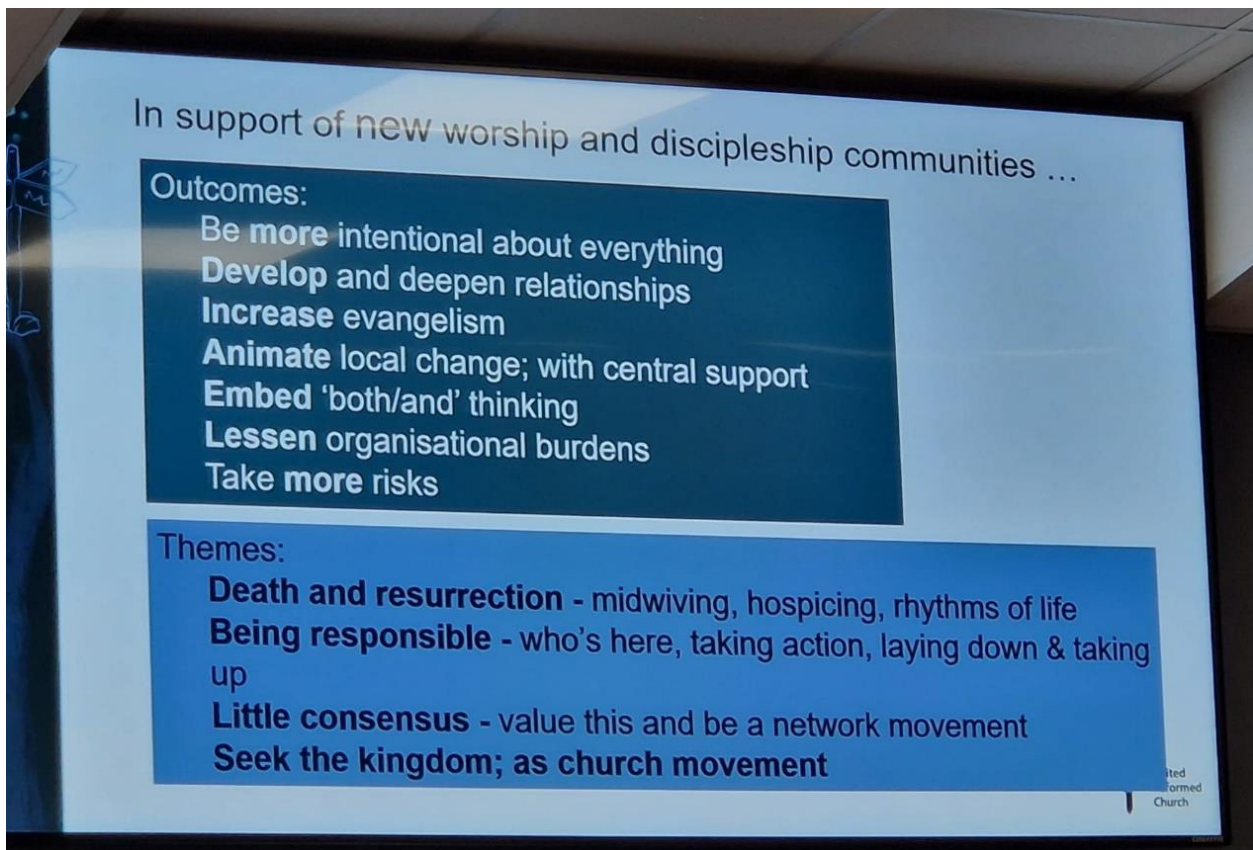
Resources Portal Operating Model: Initial Conclusions (Nov 24)

Content	Start small - but not too small! Start with what we agree on
Channels	Content should be accessible to a wide range of users
People	Properly-resourced subject matter experts Coherent sequence for releasing content
Process	Feedback mechanism for errors Notifications of content changes
Governance	Representative but streamlined decision-making

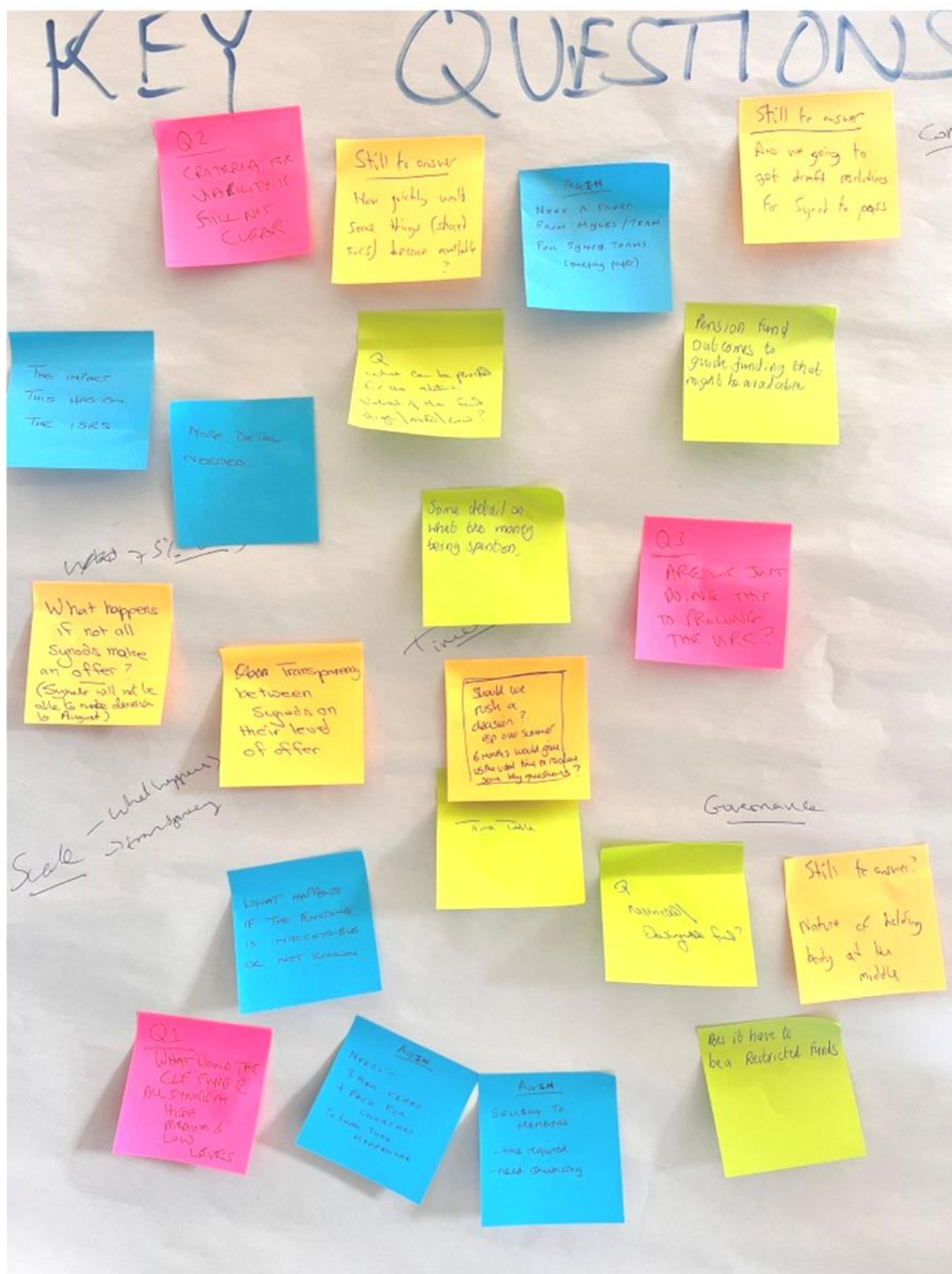
Resources hub operating model, November 2024, Shared Services Consultation

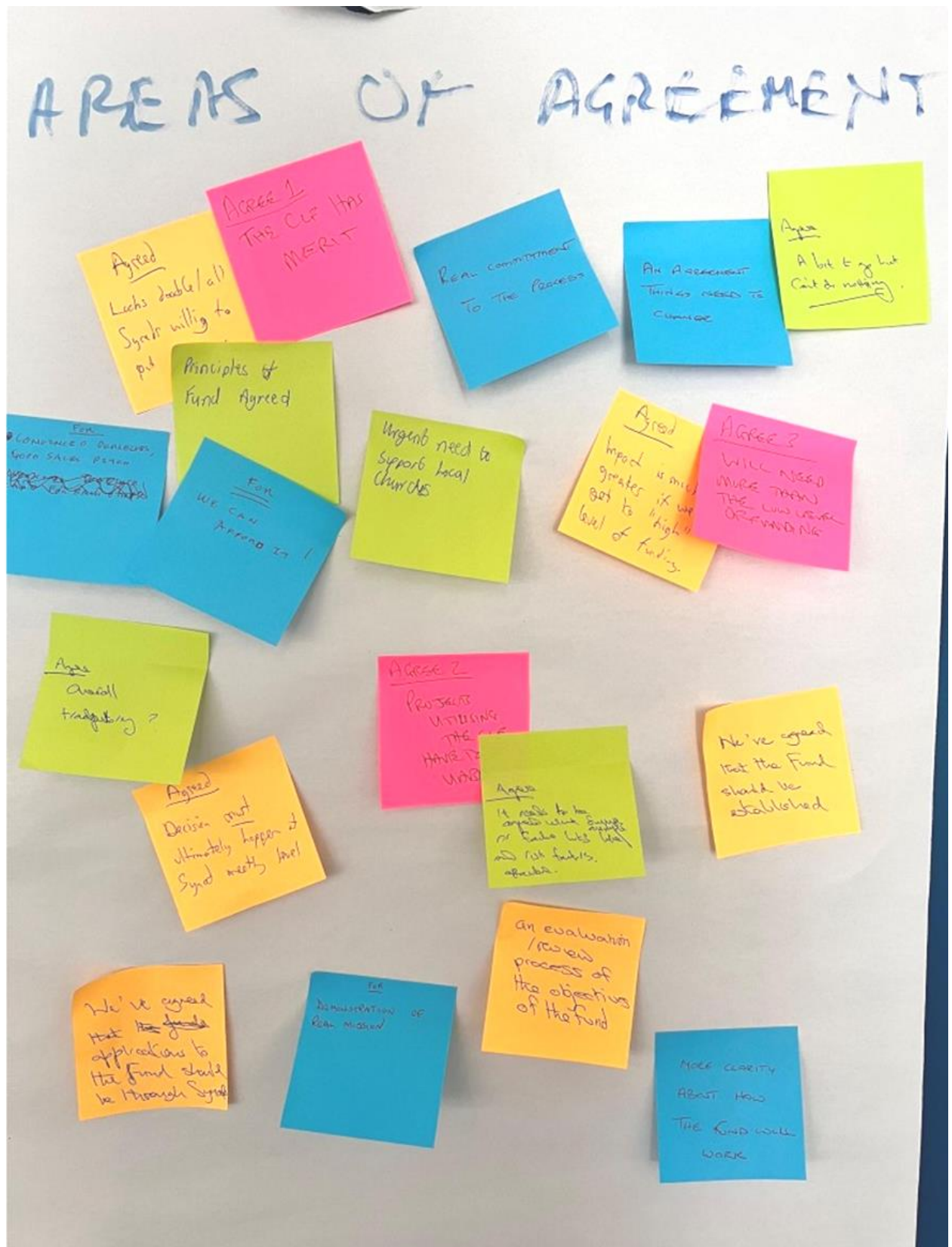
	Topic	Score
1	Payroll	4.5
2	Utilities buying and car leasing	4...
3	Local church websites	4.1
4	Legal advice	3(4)
5	IT infrastructure	5
6	HR advice	5
7	Transitional ministry	4
8	Church closure	4.5
9	Guidance on rent legislation	4

Shared services for and beyond the resources hub, November 2024,
Shared Services Consultation



Presenting outcomes and themes to attendees, January 2025,
Conversations at the Crossroads





Agreement and questions, May 2025, Shared Fund Consultation