

Paper A10

Next steps: closure of the Church Life Review & moving into consultative sessions

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 42 General Assembly endorses the design and commencement of a denominational communication strategy, aimed at raising awareness of the Church Life Fund and the services, lay worker roles, and new communities it can fund. The strategy should raise hopes, generate enthusiasm, and encourage lay worker and new communities applications. Resolution 43 Assembly acknowledges the role Resources Committee will play in implementing the Phase Two outcomes, and thanks them for this. Assembly instructs Resources Committee to bring a clear timeline back to Assembly in 2026, covering work already implemented and work yet to be completed. Resolution 44 General Assembly acknowledges the end of Church Life Review Phase Two, and with it the Church Life Review as a programme. Assembly thanks those involved in phases one and two for their generosity, input, and commitment. Resolution 45 General Assembly instructs Business Committee to form a Strategic Reference Group, distinct from the Church Life Fund Committee, which can be drawn on by relevant committees, synods, and others in their ongoing strategic work. Resolution 46 General Assembly instructs Resources and Ministries Committees to arrange a consultation with synod officers, synod trust company trustees, and other relevant decision-makers, to address underlying theological and

	other strategic and covenantal questions related to finance and governance, particularly in relation the sustainability of the Ministry and Mission Fund and the ministry provision made possible by that fund. Resolution 47 General Assembly instructs relevant committees to return to future Assemblies with the outcomes of strategic investigations, in light of the denominational commitment to collaboration.
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To reflect on the status of the CLR programme, longer-term strategic questions, and introduce the facilitated sessions.
Main points	Executive Summary This paper marks the conclusion of the Church Life Review as a programme. Phase Two's four workstreams – resource sharing, shared services, lay workers, and new communities – are now complete, and implementation will pass to the work of new and existing Assembly committees. To embed these changes, a communications strategy is proposed to raise awareness of the Church Life Fund and the opportunities it offers. Resources Committee and Church Life Fund Committee will carry forward implementation. The paper recommends formally ending the CLR as a programme, thanking those who contributed, and creating a Strategic Reference Group to retain wisdom and expertise for future discernment. Implementation and strategic work will be embedded into the work of all the councils of the Church. The paper also introduces consultative sessions for Assembly to consider longer-term strategic questions about the URC's future, focussing on purpose, people, and structures, encouraging open, prayerful exploration of the denomination's future direction.
Previous relevant documents	None
Consultation has taken place with...	CLR Steering Group & Sub-Committee Business Committee Resources Committee

Summary of impact

Financial	None
External (eg ecumenical)	None

1. Completion of Church Life Review Phase Two: Raising the hopes of the denomination

- 1.1. The Church Life Review's (CLR) four phase two workstreams (resource sharing, shared services, lay workers, and new communities) were a means to an end, with a view to medium term implementation and are now complete. It is hoped that this technical work will enable longer-term flourishing by relieving some of the burden on local churches, nourishing green shoots, and resourcing new communities of worship and discipleship.
- 1.2. Provided that key Resolutions in previous papers have been passed by Assembly, there is now a critical need for communications. We need to ensure that the Church Life Fund, the services it provides, and its funds available for lay worker and new communities grants, are known and accessed widely. We also need to ensure that there is no pocket of the church where the message is not heard.
- 1.3. Assembly will now have a critical role in endorsing, reviewing, and furthering the work the CLR has proposed.
- 1.4. We must also acknowledge that a considerable amount of implementation work, particularly in the area of shared services, falls to Resources Committee (notwithstanding Church Life Fund Committee's role in overseeing expenditure). Resources Committee has an already significant remit; it will therefore take the Committee time to schedule the work. It is suggested that the Committee return to Assembly in July 2026 with a clear implementation timeline.

2. Closure of the Church Life Review programme

- 2.1. The Church Life Review has considered a significant range of medium- and long-term questions. Due to its deliberately limited scope in phase two, it has not answered all of them. There remains much work to be done.
- 2.2. As work has progressed, the programme nomenclature 'Church Life Review' has become less and less helpful. In phase one, the name was a useful way to indicate the broad scope of enquiry. In phase two, with four limited workstreams, the name has become unhelpfully vague, and has led in many cases to a degree of misalignment between the perceived purpose of the CLR and the reality of its work.
- 2.3. Equally, it is now time for the work of the CLR to be implemented and brought into the Church's ongoing operations. Although a number of questions remain, many of these may more appropriately be addressed within the councils of the church, particularly by General Assembly Committees.
- 2.4. It is therefore suggested that, while the Church Life Fund and its committee retain their name, the Church Life Review as a programme comes to a formal end. It is suggested, therefore, that there is no programme known as 'Church Life Review Phase Three'. Implementation of the phase two outcomes will effectively be phase three, but the Church Life Review nomenclature will no longer be used.

- 2.5. To mitigate the risks associated with the end of the Church Life Review as a formal programme, primarily related to the loss of a vehicle for change initiatives and the potential for change work to become disjointed across numerous committees and church councils, it is suggested that thought is given to how change work might best be managed going forward. Related to this, the role of the CLR Programme Manager will change.
- 2.6. This **does not** mean the work is finished. Instead, it means that implementation work will now become part of other agendas, and new strategic work will need to be commenced. The possibility of a new programme is not precluded if the shape of the work suggests one would be helpful. We will allow the future structure to be shaped by the key questions General Assembly identifies. It is possible that, if a new change programme is seen as useful, it could be coordinated by the successor role to the CLR Programme Manager, which is expected to focus on leading programmes and strategy.
- 2.7. Many talented people have contributed to the CLR throughout its course. Particular thanks must go to the phase one and phase two steering groups. Thanks also go to all those who engaged with the CLR through meetings, consultations, and other forms of input. We must not lose the wisdom and experience of these people from the process. It is therefore suggested that, even though the CLR should end as a formal programme, a vehicle should be created to keep key voices close to ongoing work.

We therefore suggest that Business Committee should create a Strategic Reference Group, comprised of key individuals who have contributed in various ways, as a resource for those undertaking future strategic work. This reference group will be distinct from the Church Life Fund Committee, although depending on membership, there may be overlap. The purpose of the reference group will not be to dictate spending or make decisions, but to function as a resource for the church in its continued process of discernment.

3. Outstanding urgent questions

- 3.1. CLR Phase Two (Design) has not directly addressed questions regarding the sustainability of the Ministry and Mission Fund (M&M). This was to avoid having two highly complex conversations simultaneously, risking the delivery of the CLR portfolio. The CLR was tasked by Assembly with pursuing pragmatic solutions to critical challenges in a limited number of areas, and a decision was therefore taken to wait for the conclusion of the process before addressing the M&M Fund.
- 3.2. It has been acknowledged in many places that the current M&M model is broken: the fund's income does not cover the intended costs. The current situation is likely to worsen over the coming years. Decline in the number of local churches and members has, understandably, led to a decline in income from local churches, increasing the pressure on Synods to compensate for the shortfall. Synods have, very generously, increased their support of the fund over the past few years, but there is a ceiling on what Synods can do. Simultaneously, the link between local church contributions and provision of ministry is being eroded. By 2027, the current M&M may be reaching a crisis

point. The URC Treasurer, along with synod treasurers, and Resources Committee, feel that action now needs to be taken.

- 3.3. Synod moderators have also expressed concern that the current arrangement makes it difficult for synods to prioritise deployment of ministers. The result of this is that synods and ministers struggle to focus on areas where ministry might have the most impact, as ministers are spread too thinly.
- 3.4. We also note that, despite having made significant progress in relationships with and between synod trusts, we have still not managed to connect with many trust company trustees. These trustees represent a key constituency in the financial life of the denomination, and we therefore need to work with as many of them as possible in addressing key strategic questions around finance.
- 3.5. There are no simple answers to the problem with the M&M Fund. Taking immediate short-term-focussed action would only delay the need to address the underlying structural drivers. It is therefore suggested that a consultation is urgently needed, bringing together synod officers, and critically, for the first time, the trustees of all synod trust companies. Where appropriate and relevant, this may also include other key financial decision makers from synods and trusts.

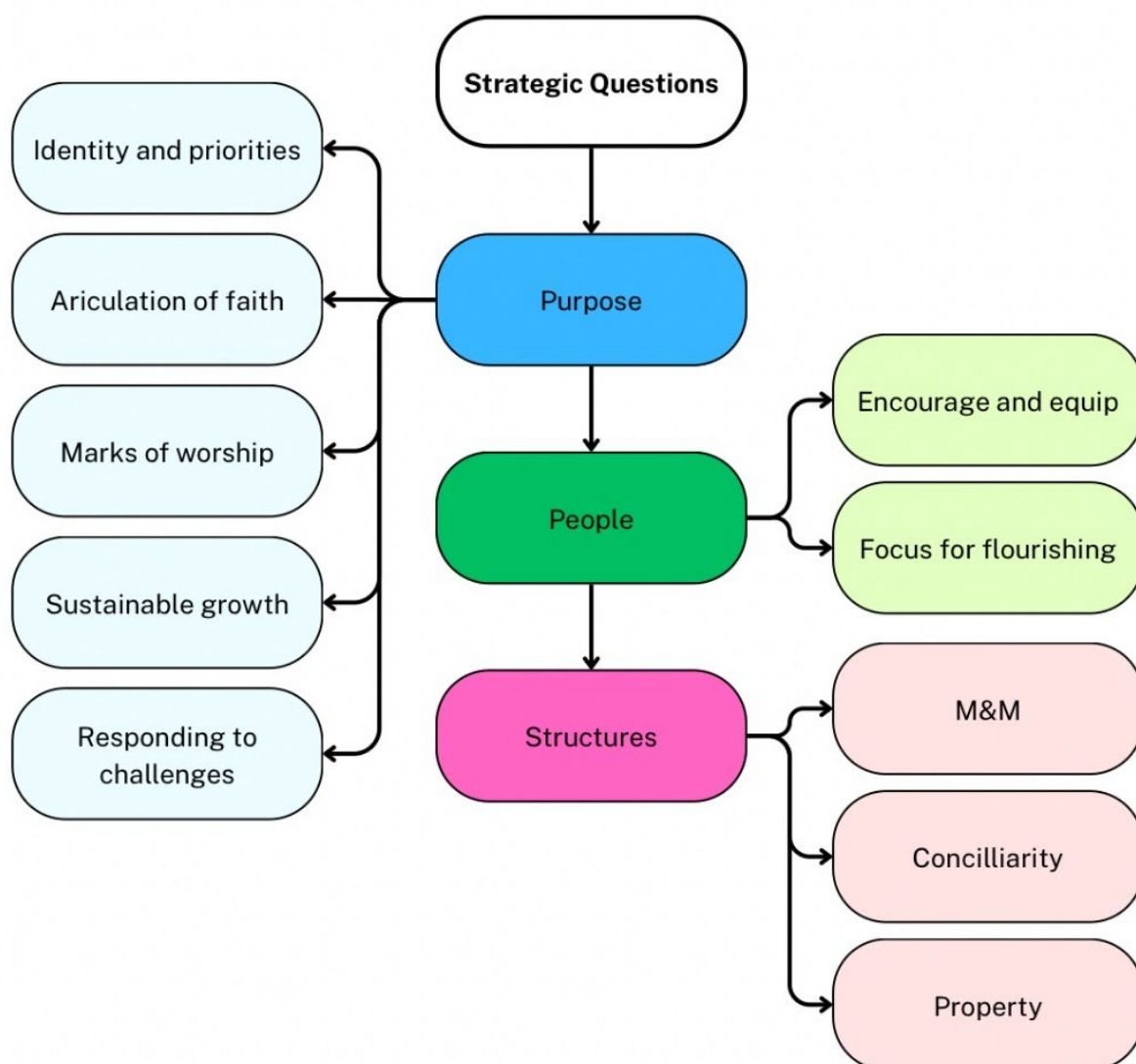
4. The future of the URC

- 4.1. The CLR Phase Two outcomes do not represent a solution to all of the challenges facing the denomination. Instead, they represent a pragmatic series of proposals in response to a limited range of key issues identified in CLR Phase One; General Assembly tasked CLR Phase Two with designing responses to these issues.
- 4.2. There is an inherent risk in strategic change programmes that, at their conclusion, we might assume that the 'change is done' and business as usual can resume. As a denomination, we need to own that the change is *not* done – indeed, perpetual reform is deeply part of the URC's DNA as a Reformed church.
- 4.3. One of the risks the phase two outcomes seek to address is that the URC could conclude its life with substantial material wealth but very few members. Though the phase two proposals seek to mediate this risk, yet other potential long-term outcomes remain.
- 4.4. Firstly, as the membership continues to decline, difficulties like inability to staff trust company boards may require greater concentration of resource and energy into collective spaces, with synods persisting as primarily ecclesial entities. This would reflect the urgent need to sustain local churches when operating thirteen trust companies becomes increasingly difficult.
- 4.5. Conversely, increasing pressure on synods, together with a growing proportion of the Church's overall resource residing with synod trusts, may lead to a situation where the collective life of the denomination becomes increasingly diminished. This would engender a shift towards a more federated structure. We observe in some cases signs that the denomination is

- already moving in this direction, although we note that considerable efforts and resources are being expended in response to these phase two proposals.
- 4.6. These possibilities underline the need for us to give serious thought to the Church's future strategic position. We are called, together, to discern what kind of Church God is calling us to become, and set out to become it intentionally. Views on these questions are likely to be varied and nuanced, tied to individual experience of church life, local context, and theological tradition. Despite the inevitable range of opinion and the sheer scale of the question, there exists significant opportunity for reform, renewal, and innovation.
- 4.7. The next section sets out a schema, which we present as a high-level framework to consider which of the strategic questions should be our priorities.

5. Long-term strategic questions

- 5.1. **Purpose:** the Church's call (enlivening faith, worship; reaching growth)
- Who are we as a denomination, what are our priorities? How might we faithfully discern and proclaim God's prophetic voice for God's Church?
 - How do we articulate our faith in God and share the Good News?
 - What would the marks of inclusive, accessible, transformative worship look like in our churches?
 - How do we identify and invest in good, sustainable growth, beyond the Church Life Fund? What data/information do we need?
 - How can the Church faithfully respond to the challenges of our age, including the climate crisis?
- 5.2. **People:** called and equipped (ministers and leaders)
- How do we encourage and equip mentor leaders *and ministers*?
 - How do we focus/target ministry, in its many forms, for flourishing?
- 5.3. **Structures:** fit for purpose (enabling our call and people)
- How does M&M need to change?
 - What does conciliar look like in the future? Do we need to change The Structure?
 - What do we need to do about our property/buildings?
- 5.4. This schema starts with the most fundamental principles: our purpose as the United Reformed Church. It then considers those who live out our purpose: our people. It finally considers whether the way the church is shaped can effectively allow our people to live out our purpose: the structures. There are other ways of addressing these questions, but this method has been chosen to reflect that it is not a 'tick box' exercise – these questions are part of an integrated journey, where old conclusions are reviewed as new conclusions are reached. Whatever the eventual process looks like, it must be dynamic, not static.



Visual depiction of key strategic questions for future work, by Alex Clare-Young

6. General Assembly's role in discerning future work

- 6.1. The questions above cut across many areas of work, and do not belong to any single committee or council of the church. In many cases a 'whole church' approach will be needed to see success.
- 6.2. Unlike normal Assemblies, we now seek to move into a consultative space. We are asking Assembly to come together and review the schema presented above in section three. Together, we will consider:
 - Do these questions adequately address the challenges the Church faces?
 - Which of these questions are priority areas for future work?
 - Is anything important missing – are there other key things we need to address?

- Will addressing these questions help us become a flourishing Church?
If not, why not?

6.3. We will be facilitated in our conversations by Dr Gordon Woods. Dr Woods has facilitated four of the five CLR consultations across phases one and two. We extend our sincere thanks to Dr Woods for his time, skills, and grace.