

Book of Reports 2025

Extraordinary General Assembly,
14-16 November 2025



The
United
Reformed
Church





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Online papers: www.bit.ly/generalassemblypapers

Dear Members of General Assembly,

Together, we are approaching a very different kind of General Assembly. When we gather at Kents Hill Park in Milton Keynes for the Extraordinary General Assembly on 14-16 November, we gather in the knowledge that this is a Kairos moment in the life of the United Reformed Church – a moment of opportunity and renewal, in which we review the outputs of a Spirit-led process of discernment.

In July 2023, Assembly tasked Church Life Review Phase Two (Design) with working up proposals for financial resource sharing, provision of shared support services, employment of lay workers, and new communities of discipleship and worship (Resolutions 47-51a, General Assembly 2023). In November, we will review the outputs of this phase of work. At the heart of the proposals is a new shared Church Life Fund, out of which innovative and essential shared services, grants for lay workers in local church roles, and new communities of discipleship and worship will be funded.

The papers, which are now available online, represent the combined output of several years' work. The papers deal with complex topics, which require substantial detail in places. Yet beneath the detail lies a portfolio of proposals which will bring substantive change in our Church. Some of you may have particular interests, and to make this easier we suggest a few starting points:

- For an overview of the proposals and the scriptural underpinning, read Paper A1.
- For an overview of the Church Life Fund, what it will enable, and its finances, read Papers A2 and A11 (A11 will be published after Synod Meetings in October).
- For an overview of the upcoming denominational shared resources hub, myURC, read Paper A3.
- For an overview of the innovative new approach to denominationally developed and locally delivered services, read Papers A4, A5, and A6.
- For an overview of grants for lay workers in local churches, read Paper A8 (along with Paper A7).
- For an overview of grants for new URC communities of discipleship and worship, read Paper A9
- For an overview of the next phase of strategic work as we faithfully respond to God's call, read Paper A10.

The papers are the result of a big and deeply collaborative effort from people across the councils of the Church, who have come together in consultations, meetings, and other fora to collectively discern where God is leading us. All of these papers contribute to the same, overarching vision: a flourishing church, less burdened and better enabled. The CLR Steering Group is excited to share these papers with you. We hope that, as you read them, you will share our excitement about the opportunities which lie ahead.

This Assembly will be different in other ways, too. After the business of reviewing the papers and resolutions, we will change mode, collectively discerning the key questions we need to address as we enter the next phase of strategic work. In all this we seek the flourishing of Christ's Church, reformed and always being reformed, to the glory of God.

We are very much looking forward to gathering with you all in Milton Keynes in November.

With warmest wishes,

John Bradbury, General Secretary
Steve Faber, Steering Group Convenor
Myles Dunnett, Programme Manager

Minutes of a meeting of the United Reformed Church General Assembly

Meeting on Friday 4th July 2025

1 Constitution of Assembly

The Assembly met at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire. The General Secretary, the Revd Dr John Bradbury, welcomed members, laid the Roll of Assembly on the table, and invited the Moderator to constitute the Assembly with prayer. The Moderator, the Revd Tim Meadows, welcomed members and duly constituted Assembly and invited the Chaplains to lead Assembly in a celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

2 The Roll of Assembly 2025

Moderator	1. The Revd Timothy Meadows
Clerk	2. The Revd Sarah Moore
Assistant Clerk	3. The Revd Dr Alex Clare-Young
General Secretary	4. The Revd Dr John Bradbury
Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship)	5. The Revd Jenny Mills
Deputy General Secretary (Mission)	6. The Revd Philip Brooks
Chief Operating Officer	7. Mrs Victoria James
Treasurer	8. Mr Alan Yates
Deputy Treasurer	9. Mr Vaughan Griffiths

Convenors of General Assembly Standing Committees, except the Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee

10. Business Committee – The Revd Mark Robinson
11. Children and Youth Work – The Revd Samantha Sheehan
12. Resources – The Revd Dr Michael Hopkins
13. Education and Learning – Ms Pippa Hodgson
14. Equalities – The Revd Jo Clare-Young
15. Worship, Faith, and Order – The Revd Dr Robert Pope
16. Ministries – The Revd Mary Thomas
17. Mission – Mrs Sarah Lane Cawte
18. Nominations – Ms Victoria Blunt
19. Safeguarding – The Revd Roger Jones

Convenor of the United Reformed Church Trust

20. The Revd Nick Mark

Immediate Past Moderator

21. The Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson

Former Moderators (4 places)

22. The Revd David Grosch-Miller
23. The Revd Dr Michael Jagessar
24. The Revd Dr Stephen Orchard
25. The Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe

Resource Centres for Learning

26. Northern College Staff – The Revd Dr Adam Scott
27. Northern College Student – Mr Tom Miller
28. Scottish College Staff – The Revd Dr John McNeil Scott
29. Scottish College Student – Mrs Yvonne Hamilton
30. Westminster College Staff – The Revd Dr Robert Pope
31. Westminster College Student – Mrs Sue Knight

United Reformed Church Youth (3 places)

32. Youth Assembly Moderator – Miss Maya Withall
33. Youth Assembly Moderator-Elect – Miss Kacie Hodgson
34. Youth Assembly GA/AE rep – Miss Lizzie Crossley

United Reformed Church Chaplain to HM Forces (1 place)

35. vacant

Northern Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

36. The Synod Moderator – The Revd Kim Plumpton
37. The Synod Clerk - The Revd Dr Trevor Jamison
38. The Revd Sally Bateman
39. The Revd Ed Butlin
40. The Revd Louise Sanders
41. The Revd Ryan Sirmons
42. The Revd Nadene Snyman
43. Mrs Felicity Barker
44. Mrs Lucy Cooke
45. Mr Mathew Hall
46. Ms Lisa McAvoy
47. Mrs Liz Morrell
48. Mr Alvin Ponnudurai*
49. Mrs Catherine Ramsay
50. Dr Ann Sinclair
51. Vacant

North Western Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

52. The Synod Moderator – The Revd Clare Downing
53. The Synod Clerk – Mr Tim Hopley
54. The Revd Steph Atkins
55. The Revd Richard Bradley
56. The Revd Gilbert Esambe
57. The Revd Dan Harris
58. The Revd Katherine Hunt
59. The Revd Kurauone Mutimwii
60. The Revd Mike Walsh
61. Mr Mal Breeze

62. Mr Jed Garside
63. Ms Gina Gibson
64. Mrs Hilary Grierson
65. Ms Elizabeth Hall
66. Ms Blessed Mutimwii*
67. Miss Jay Tynan*

Mersey Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

68. The Synod Moderator - The Revd Geoff Felton
69. The Synod Clerk – Ms Rita Griffiths
70. The Revd Louise Franklin
71. The Revd Ceri Gardner
72. The Revd Malcolm Garforth-Fife
73. The Revd Catherine McFie
74. The Revd Dr Ronald Reid
75. The Revd Ruth Wilson
76. Mrs Patricia Cansfield
77. Mr Christopher Garforth-Fife
78. Ms Andrea Heron
79. Miss Emma Jackson*
80. Miss Monica Mason
81. Ms Charlotte Samson*
82. Mr Paul Spencer
83. Ms Wendy Steven

Yorkshire Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

84. The Synod Moderator - The Revd Jamie Kissack
85. The Synod Clerk - Mr Tim Crossley
86. The Synod Treasurer – The Revd Simon Copley
87. The Revd Joseph Amoah
88. The Revd David Coote
89. The Revd Dr Simon Cross
90. The Revd Fran Kissack
91. The Revd Alison Micklem
92. Mr John Eveleigh
93. Mr Rod Morrison
94. Miss Lydia Raddings*
95. Mrs Irish Sirmons +
96. Ms Helen Snashall
97. Mrs Janet Virr
98. Miss Megan Westgarth*
99. Vacant

Minutes from General Assembly, July 2025

East Midlands Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

100. The Synod Moderator – The Revd Geoffrey Clarke
101. The Synod Clerk – Dr Graham Jennings
102. The Synod Treasurer – Mr David Greatorex
103. The Revd Liz Adams
104. The Revd Nigel Adkinson
105. The Revd Craig Muir
106. The Revd George Mwaura
107. Mr Andrew Bodsworth
108. Mr Paul Hadley
109. Mr Billy Logan*
110. Mrs Vicky Longbone
111. Mrs Ann Luckett
112. Mrs Barbara Moses
113. Mrs Isabel Plaatjies
114. Mrs Ruth Tompsett
115. Vacant

West Midlands Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

116. The Synod Moderator – The Revd Steve Faber
117. The Synod Clerk – Mrs Rachel Wakeman
118. The Synod Treasurer – Mr Steve Powell
119. The Revd Dr Ashley Barker
120. The Revd Anji Barker
121. The Revd Fiona Elvins
122. The Revd Elaine Hutchinson
123. The Revd Karen Jones
124. The Revd Mark Rodgers
125. Mr Celvon Binns
126. Mr Andrew Evans
127. Mr Isaac Irvine*
128. Mrs Clare Nutbrown-Hughes
129. Mrs Michelle Richardson
130. Mrs Liz Swanwick
131. Mr Reuben Watt*

Eastern Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

132. The Synod Moderator – The Revd Lythan Nevard
133. The Synod Clerk – The Revd David Coaker
134. The Revd David Rees
135. The Revd Anne Sardeson

136. The Revd Janet Sutton
137. The Revd Kathryn Taylor
138. The Revd Nigel Uden
139. Mr Andrew East
140. Ms Alison Jiggins
141. Mr Richard Lewney
142. Mr William McVey
143. Mrs Faith Paulding
144. Mr John White
145. Mrs Charlotte Remblance
146. Vacant
147. Vacant

South Western Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

148. The Synod Moderator – The Revd David Downing
149. The Synod Clerk – Mrs Rachel Leach
150. The Synod Treasurer – The Revd Dick Gray
151. The Revd Jessica Ashcroft-Townsley
152. The Revd Stephen Newell
153. The Revd Richard Pope
154. The Revd Yohan Song
155. The Revd Jayne Taylor
156. The Revd Neil Thorogood
157. Ms Rachel Coward
158. Miss Jess Gough*
159. Mrs Janet Gray
160. Dr Ian Harrison
161. Mr Alex Mabbott
162. Ms Marie Trubic
163. Vacant

Wessex Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

164. The Synod Clerk – Miss Karen Bell
165. The Revd Helen Everard
166. The Revd Dr Sarah Hall
167. The Revd Wayne Hawkins
168. The Revd Dr Romilly Micklem
169. The Revd Timothy Searle
170. The Revd Ray Stanyon
171. Mr Tony Brett
172. Mr Jamie Laird*
173. Mrs Maggie Larkin
174. Mr Mark Phillips
175. Mr Clive Snashall

176. Mrs Anne Wood
177. Dr Gordon Woods
178. Vacant
179. Vacant

Thames North Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

180. The Synod Moderator - The Revd George Watt
181. The Synod Clerk – Ms Nneoma Chima
182. The Revd Brian Busckill
183. The Revd Alison Davis
184. The Revd Shahbaz Javed
185. The Revd Sujeeth Kumar
186. Mr Chris Akinyeye
187. Mr Lola Fatogun
188. Mr Malon John*
189. Mr Peter Knowles
190. Mrs Rhona Lawrenson
191. Mrs Muna Levan-Harris
192. Miss Christine Ntim*
193. Mr Jake Penny
194. Miss Amarachi Uzoka*
195. Mrs Jean Wyber

Southern Synod

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

196. The Synod Treasurer – Mr John Denison
197. The Revd Siobhan Antoniou
198. The Revd Ruth Armstrong
199. The Revd Cristina Cipriani
200. The Revd Russell Furley-Smith
201. The Revd John Grundy
202. The Revd Charisa Hunter-Crump
203. The Revd Martin Knight
204. The Revd Memona Shahbaz
205. Miss Lisa Boatri*
206. Mr Alan Kirby
207. Mrs Nicola Martin
208. Mr Mark Rigby
209. Mr Zeerak Shahbaz*
210. Miss Pamela Tolhurst
211. vacant

National Synod of Wales

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

212. The Synod Moderator – The Revd David Salsbury
213. The Synod Clerk –Ms Megan Price
214. The Synod Treasurer – Mr Chris Atherton
215. The Revd Jason Askew
216. The Revd Dr Susan Durber
217. The Revd Julie Kirby
218. The Revd Lee Liddell
219. The Revd Martha McInnes
220. The Revd John O'Hanlon
221. The Revd Kate Wolsey
222. Miss Oreoluwa Kassim*
223. Ms Sheila Kavanagh
224. Ms Maggie Kirkbride
225. Mrs Wendy Marston-Phipps
226. Mrs Bethan Trott
227. Mr Jayden Williams*

National Synod of Scotland

(16 places – at least 5 of which shall be Ministers of Word and Sacrament or Church Related Community Workers, and at least 5 of which shall be Elders or “lay”. Any 2 within the 16 places are reserved for representatives aged under 26 at the time of appointment)

228. The Synod Moderator – The Revd Lindsey Sanderson
229. The Synod Clerk – The Revd Jan Adamson
230. The Revd Stewart Cutler
231. The Revd Susan Henderson
232. The Revd Nick Mark
233. The Revd David Scott
234. The Revd Lesley Thomson
235. Mrs Yvonne Coulter
236. Mrs Margaret Fairgrieve
237. Dr Ewen Harley
238. Mrs Linda Harrison
239. Mr Douglas Maxwell
240. Mrs Nan Maxwell
241. Vacant
242. Vacant
243. Vacant

British and Irish Ecumenical representatives (5 places)

244. The Rt Revd Rosemary Frew (Church of Scotland)
245. The Revd Tom Osborne (Methodist Church of Great Britain)
246. Fr Dominic Robinson, SJ (Catholic Church in England and Wales)
247. Mrs Hilary Treavis (Baptist Union of Great Britain)
248. The Revd Chantal Noppen (Church of England)

International Ecumenical representatives (5 places)

249. The Revd Géza Kacsó (Reformed Church in Transcarpathia, Ukraine)

- 250. Pasteur Charles Klagba-Kuadjovi (L'Église Protestante Unie de France)
- 251. Pfarrer Martin Henninger (Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz, Germany)
- 252. Dr Francesca Nuzzolese (Waldensian Evangelical Church, Italy)
- 253. Vacant

Council for World Mission (1 place)

- 254. The Revd Dr Graham McGeoch

*indicates those Synod representatives aged 25 or under at the time of their appointment.

+indicates those appointed to a vacant place from another Synod under Rule 1.5.

Session 1 Friday 4th July 16.30 - 18.30

1 Introductions and Ecumenical Guests

The Moderator introduced the Revd Dr John Bradbury, General Secretary, the Revd Sarah Moore, Clerk, the Revd Dr Alex Clare-Young, Assistant Clerk and the Revd Mark Robinson, Convenor of the Business Committee. He also introduced the chaplains and called upon the Revd Philip Brooks, Deputy General Secretary (Mission) to introduce the Ecumenical Guests. The Revd Géza Kacsó, from the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia, greeted Assembly and gave an update on the situation in Ukraine. He asked Assembly to continue to pray for his church, Ukraine and for peace. The Rt Rev Rosie Frew brought greetings from the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and responded, on behalf of the ecumenical guests, to the greetings from the URC. The Moderator formally greeted the guests and presented them with gifts.

2 Mock Resolution

The Clerk introduced a Mock Resolution to demonstrate to Assembly how to use the consensus decision making and voting cards.

3 Miscellanea

The Clerk clarified the threshold for removing items on en bloc is, according to Standing Orders, 6 members of Assembly. No item received that many requests for withdrawal from en bloc. The Clerk, however, noted that the Resources Committee had withdrawn paper G1.

The Clerk reminded Assembly that first time speaker cards should be used only once and speeches should not repeat points already made.

The Clerk moved Resolution 39. The Moderator asked Assembly to vote; the Resolution passed unanimously.

Resolution 39

General Assembly appoints Samantha Sheehan, Trevor Jamieson, Richard Bradley, Geoff Felton, Janet Virr, David Greatorex, Reuben Watt, Faith Paulding, Marie Trubic, Gordon Woods, Muna Levan-Harris, Martha McInnes and Ewen Harley to serve as members of the Facilitation Group for its meeting between 4-7 July 2025 in accordance with Standing Order 7.7.

The Clerk moved Resolution 40. The Moderator asked Assembly to vote; the Resolution passed unanimously.

Resolution 40

General Assembly appoints the Revd Dr Romilly Micklem and the Revd Janet Sutton to serve as tellers for the 2026-2027 election of the Moderator of the General Assembly.

The Clerk moved Resolution 41. The Moderator asked Assembly to vote; the Resolution passed unanimously.

Resolution 41

General Assembly appoints Morag McLintock to serve as Convenor of Tellers for its meetings 4-7 July 2025 and 14-16 November 2025.

4 Synod Moderators' Report

The Revd Geoffrey Clarke introduced the report of the Synod Moderators encouraging us all to be a people "full of grace." The report was accepted unanimously by General Assembly who thereafter briefly discussed the questions at the end of the report.

5 Paper T2-Safeguarding – Safeguarding Training Framework

The Revd Roger Jones, Convenor of the Safeguarding Committee, presented the paper and moved Resolutions 36 and 37.

Questions for Clarification

The Revd Dr Romilly Micklem asked about the status of ministers on the Roll but in "other roles". Nicola Furley-Smith, Secretary for Ministries referred him to the Active Ministers Policy (available on the URC website).

Alison Jiggins asked why some people who oversee responsibilities for safeguarding don't need to do the intermediate nor the advanced training. Mr Jones responded this was because they are not directly working with young people or people at risk.

Karen Bell asked about who would be responsible for discipline of those who decline to undertake the training. Ms Furley-Smith responded explaining that Assembly had already adopted a process to deal with ministers who refuse to undertake mandatory training. Dr Bradbury confirmed this process would apply for Office Holders who refuse to undertake the mandatory training.

The Revd Tom Osborn asked about the lack of mention of ecumenical partners; Mr Jones reminded Assembly that ecumenical representatives are on the Safeguarding Committee and that this framework is specifically for those engaging in ministry within the URC. Dr Bradbury noted that LEPs have to choose which denomination's safeguarding processes and policies that are to be followed.

Megan Price noted some formatting difficulties in the pages relating to the National Synod of Scotland Mr Jones undertook to correct these.

Discussion

The Moderator moved Assembly to the discussion stage.

The Revd Dr Michael Hopkins moved an amendment adding a new clause to Resolution 37:

“37a General Assembly delegates future updating of the Safeguarding Training Framework to the Business Committee after they have consulted with the National Synods of Scotland and Wales.”

Mr Chris Atherton seconded this.

Assembly accepted the amendment by majority.

Resolution 36

General Assembly adopts the amended Safeguarding Training Framework for use across the United Reformed Church.

This was passed by majority.

Resolution 37

General Assembly instructs the Denominational Safeguarding Team and Synods to oversee the implementation of the framework.

This was passed by majority.

37a General Assembly delegates future updating of the Safeguarding Training Framework to the Business Committee after they have consulted with the National Synods of Scotland and Wales.

This was passed by majority.

6 Paper H4-Ministries Review of the URC Retirement Policy for Ministers of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers

The Moderator invited the Revd Mary Thomas, Convenor of the Ministries Committee to introduce the report and Resolution 28.

Resolution 28

General Assembly notes the report from Ministries Committee on the review of the URC Ministerial Retirement Policy and the Policy for the Extension to the Normal Retirement Age.

This passed unanimously.

Ms Thomas introduced Resolution 29 asking Assembly to choose one or other of the options within the Resolution in order to provide the Ministries Committee with a steer re

this matter. There were no questions for clarification and the Moderator moved Assembly into the discussion stage. After extensive discussion the Moderator placed this item into remaindered business and adjourned Assembly for dinner after offering grace.

Session 2 Friday 4th July 20.00 - 21.00

7 Paper H2-Ministries – Criteria for the 13 new pioneering posts to intentionally grow new Christian communities

The Moderator invited the Revd Mary Thomas, Convenor of the Ministries Committee, to introduce paper H2 and Resolution 27.

Questions for Clarification

The Revd Geoff Felton asked if consultation had taken place with current Pioneer Ministers. The Revd Nicola Furley Smith stated that the SCM Ministers were part of the process so current Pioneer Ministers who are SCMs were involved but acknowledged that Pioneer Ministers as an identified group were not specifically consulted. Furthermore Mr Felton commented that paragraph 2 in the paper indicated that “The Missional Lens of the URC” was a fait accompli despite the fact that General Assembly still had to consider it. Dr Bradbury advised that, were the “Missional Lens of the URC” matters to be rejected by General Assembly, the relevant paragraphs would fall.

The Revd Craig Muir asked about paragraph 7 (discerning a vocation to pioneer ministry) and how people were assessed (and trained) to be pioneers. Ms Furley-Smith said that the process would be similar for the current Special Category Ministry posts where Synods develop criteria for posts and that people will apply through the Moderators’ Meeting. She further added that ministers should be released to undertake further and specific training (for example via the Newbegin Hub).

The Revd Janet Sutton asked if Assembly was being asked to adopt the criteria for pioneering or the whole process. Ms Furley-Smith noted it was the process that Assembly were being asked to adopt.

Mr Mal Breeze asked what the definition was for “pioneer ministers” and what, if any, effect there would be on Church Related Community Workers. Ms Furley-Smith has already adopted Marks of Ministry for Pioneering (for lay people) and feels these are useful for ministers who are pioneers.

The Revd Dr Trevor Jamison noted Dr Bradbury’s comments about Section 2 of the paper and pointed out the Mission Committee’s supplementary resolution about the centrality of evangelism and faith sharing. If that is adopted he asked for an assurance that this would be reflected in pioneer ministry. Dr Bradbury assured Dr Jamison this would be the case.

Maya Withall asked whether if one Synod did not “use” “their” Pioneer Ministry post, could another Synod? Ms Furley-Smith indicated one post per Synod was envisaged.

The Revd David Salsbury felt the paper was confusing, highlighting that the URC does not create posts for people and was concerned that there might be a breach of that principle in

the paper. Ms Furley-Smith felt this was not the case as Synods would create posts where a need had been identified without thinking of particular people who might test a call to it.

The Revd Dr Susan Durber asked for clarification about a tension within the paper. In some places there is an ontological reality to a pioneer minister but in other parts of the paper it explored the idea of opening up these roles so that all ministers might work in this role for a time. Dr Bradbury noted there is no intent to create a discrete order of pioneers.

Mr Reuben Watt asked what research had been done to use Ministers of Word and Sacrament in this way rather than deploy them to our existing churches. Ms Furley-Smith noted that no specific research was undertaken re this but the work came from a review of Special Category Ministry where the posts were never fully filled. The new Pioneer Posts are intended to be an experiment with one post per Synod.

Ms Helen Snashall asked if the roles in paragraph 8.4 would be open to CRCWs. Ms Furley-Smith noted that the new communities would be of discipleship and worship; CRCWs are not expected to lead worship and preach so this pioneer role would not be the focus of their training or ministry.

The Revd Chantel Noppen asked about how the various reviews would work and if these were “make or break” reviews. Ms Furley-Smith noted the reviews were to be more intentional in the church’s oversight; a decision not to renew a post might be part of that.

The Revd Dr Simon Cross asked for consideration regarding the continuing use of the term “pioneer” as he found it problematic and would prefer “innovator”. He felt “pioneer” is a term reeking of colonialism. Ms Furley-Smith noted this had been considered and, alongside other denominations, the URC had not come up with anything better despite the colonial overtones.

The Revd Anji Barker asked if these posts would be open for lay ministers as well as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Ms Furley-Smith felt there was difficulty with creating these 13 posts as lay posts as the funding comes from the Mission and Ministry fund which is for stipendiary ministry. However, the Church Life Review Process should create opportunities for lay people to work in these ways. She highlighted the work of the Newbiggin Pioneer Hub.

The Revd Janet Sutton requested that existing pioneers in the URC should be fully consulted about the reality of this ministry and wondered if there are enough URC ministers with the requisite experience. Ms Furley-Smith noted that if too few URC ministers applied there are mechanisms for ministers of other denominations to apply.

The Revd Lee Liddell indicated the resolution felt very binary as “normal” ministry in the URC already involves pioneering work.

The Revd Liz Adams appreciated Ms Liddell’s comments about the pioneering nature of contemporary URC ministry and asked if a minister would need to engage in formal training in pioneering before applying for one of these new posts.

Dr Jamison expressed disappointment that the failure to address liminal ministry meant that the wider context of pioneer ministry cannot be addressed. He requested a change of proposed practice in 8.2 where the Synods are asked to make a Zoom presentation

whereas he felt it better for presentations to happen in situ where the ministry will take place.

Ms Faith Paulding proposed an amendment to replace the word “criteria” to “process” and remove “pioneering.” Mal Breeze seconded this. The Moderator tested the mood of Assembly using consensus cards. Assembly and Ms Thomas were warm to these amendments.

The Clerk advised that the removal of the word “pioneer” would be out of order given Assembly had only adopted the creation of 13 new “pioneer” posts at General Assembly 2024. The Moderator so ruled.

Ms Furley-Smith assured Assembly that further work would be done by the Ministries Committee on the term “pioneer”.

The amendment to substitute “criteria” with “process” was carried unanimously.

Resolution 27

General Assembly adopts the process for the 13 new pioneering posts intentionally to grow new Christian communities.

This was carried unanimously.

8: Retirement Age for Ministers

The Moderator, the Revd Nigel Uden took the chair. Assembly returned to discussion on paper H4. The Moderator invited Assembly to show warmth to either Resolution 29a or b. The majority of Assembly indicated their warmth to 29b. After inviting discussion on 29b, Assembly moved to a vote with no further discussion.

Resolution 29

In light of the report, General Assembly is minded to move towards the removal of a Normal Retirement Age and instructs Ministries Committee to continue its work on the implications of the removal and bring appropriate proposals to Assembly Executive in February 2026.

OR

In light of the report, General Assembly is not minded to move towards the removal of a Normal Retirement Age and instructs Ministries Committee to continue its work on the Policy for the Extension to the Normal Retirement Age and bring appropriate proposals to Assembly Executive in February 2026.

Assembly approved option b by majority. Dr Bradbury noted that the further work might indicate this position is not legally sustainable but thorough further work will be undertaken.

The Moderator thanked Ms Thomas and Ms Furley-Smith.
The Chaplains invited Assembly to individually participate in Prayer Stations

Minutes, Saturday 5th July 09.00 - 10.30

The Moderator invited the chaplains to lead worship and Dr Francesca Nuzzolese to lead Assembly in Bible Study.

9 Paper B1-CYWC – 2023-25 Children and Youth Work Committee Report

The Moderator invited the Convenor of the Children and Youth Work Committee, the Revd Samathan Sheehan, to present what may be the last report to Assembly of this Committee before it is absorbed into the new Faith in Action Committee. This was received warmly by Assembly with applause.

10 Education & Learning – presentation

The Moderator invited the Convenor of the Education and Learning Committee, Ms Pippa Hodgson, to address Assembly on the highlights of the Committee's work before it ceases as a separate entity and is absorbed into the new Faith in Action Committee. This was received warmly by Assembly with applause.

11 Paper BDFH1-CYWC – Children's Youth and Family Task Group

The Moderator invited the Revd Samantha Sheehan and Dr Sam Richards to present this paper and Resolution 20. This was presented as the final response to Resolution 13 of General Assembly 2024.

Discussion took place following no questions for clarification.

Resolution 20

Following the outcome of the discussion at Assembly Executive 2025, General Assembly:

- a) commends the training programmes offered through Northern College and Westminster College to train Children's, Youth and Family Workers at local level;***
- b) instructs the new Ministries and Faith in Action Committees to explore how this training can be offered to those working with children and young people, including funding opportunities;***
- c) encourages the conversations to continue as the URC focuses on ministry, training and the Church Life Review; thanks the Task Group for its work.***

This was passed unanimously. Assembly affirmed the importance of Children, Youth and Family work and all those who support this ministry with applause.

12 Place for Hope mediation team launch

The Moderator invited Carolyn Merry, Director and Martha Hunt Programme Lead (Training and Reconciliation) of Place for Hope to address Assembly regarding the joint programme to enable a culture of peace making within the URC and implement conflict transformation. The Revd Martha McInnes shared her motivation for being one of the newly trained practitioners. Assembly were advised that the project will be gradually rolled out throughout the URC, commencing in the North Western Synod and the National Synod of Scotland from this weekend. The Revd Lindsey Sanderson, Moderator of the National

Synod of Scotland, reflected on the Synod's experience so far and hopes for the future as part of this partnership. The Revd Jenny Mills advised Assembly of the practicalities of moving this exciting, culture-changing, venture forward.

Session 4 Saturday 5th July 11.00 - 13.00

13 Presentation of candidates for General Assembly Moderator 2026-2027

The Moderator, the Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe, took the chair and invited the Assembly Moderator candidates, the Revd Dr Mitchell Bunting and the Revd Neil Thorogood, to address Assembly in turn. Dr Thorpe asked each candidate the same question (answered in the absence of the other.) namely "What does hope mean for you?" Dr Thorpe invited the chaplain to lead Assembly in prayer and invited Assembly to vote individually by secret ballot.

14 General Secretary's Address

The Moderator, the Revd Tim Meadows took the chair, and asked Dr Bradbury to address Assembly.

Dr Bradbury invited Assembly to recite the Nicene Creed in this 1700th anniversary year of its compilation. Dr Bradbury offered some reflections on the Nicene Creed and its theology in the life of the URC, challenged Assembly on ensuring recognition of God moving within our midst, encouraged Assembly to ensure God can be effectively encountered and embraced in our "church" work, our (high quality) worship, and in our common life. He encouraged all to deepen our confidence in the reality of the living God, to be more confident in evangelism, and in how we speak of God. The Moderator invited questions and discussion following Dr Bradbury's address and thanked Dr Bradbury for his ministry and message.

15 Community Awards

The Moderator introduced the Community Awards for 2025. Assembly watched videos which showcased the work of the various projects.

The Moderator made awards to the winners: Diss URC, Dove Dementia Cafe represented by Ruth Bridges and Gabrielle Pagan; Rivertown URC, Food with Friends, represented by the Revd Johnny O'Hanlon and Sheila Kavanagh; and Union Church Margate, Food For Thought, represented by Christopher Butler and Grace Saint.

The Moderator also greeted those projects which were highly commended: St Andrew's Roundhay URC, Forget-Me-Not Cafe represented by Brenda Casey and Heather Thomson; Longton URC, Stepping Out for The Community represented by Philippa Simpson, Kath Warren, Denise Keen and the Revd Karen Jones; Vine URC, Vine Gardening Club represented by Sheila Baldwin and the Revd Sujeeth Kumar; and Wilsden Trinity Church, Soupermums represented by Daphne Egan and Diana Hogg.

Following prayer, Assembly adjourned for lunch.

Session 5 Saturday 5th July 14.00 - 16.00

16 Paper X2 Emergency Statement on Israeli Military Activity

The Moderator allowed an emergency item of business concerning Israeli Military Activity to be admitted onto the agenda and invited the Revd Steve Faber to present Paper X2 and Resolution 42.

Questions for Clarification

The Revd Dr Romilly Micklem asked where the WCC statement could be found. Mr Faber responded that the whole text from the WCC is referenced on a URL in a footnote in the text and can be found:

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-palestine-and-israel-a-call-to-end-apartheid-occupation-and-impunity-in-palestine-and-israel>

Assembly moved into discussion.

Resolution 42

General Assembly:

(a) commends the June 2025 statement from the World Council of Churches with its call to 'End Apartheid, Occupation, and Impunity in Palestine and Israel' including the assertion that the Government of Israel's military campaign in Gaza has entailed grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention which may constitute genocide and/or other crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)

(b) calls for a peaceful resolution to the continuing conflict in the Middle East through dialogue and diplomacy.

The resolution was carried unanimously.

17 Paper A4-Business Committee – Reducing the size of General Assembly

The Moderator invited the General Secretary to introduce Paper A4. Assembly then broke into small groups to discuss questions in the paper. When Assembly returned, discussion resumed on Paper A4 and Resolution 7.

Questions for Clarification

Mr Peter Knowles asked if there was an option C as his group had a better idea. Dr Bradbury responded that our Consensus Decision Making process would allow this were Assembly of a mind to discuss it.

Mr Reuben Watt asked if a proportional representation method had been considered rather than equal numbers per Synod. Dr Bradbury reminisced that this used to be in place but was replaced with equal representation to avoid geographical dominance.

The Revd Tom Osborne updated Assembly with the changes made re representation/numbers to the Methodist Conference and their new denominational Trustee Body (The Connexional Council). Dr Bradbury thanked Mr Osborne for his update.

Ms Elizabeth Crossley asked what was meant by “diversity representative”. Dr Bradbury explained that diversity representatives were a new idea which was being explored which would allow, after all nominations had been made, a review of where people with protected

characteristics were under representatives could be appointed to increase that diversity. He advised this is a practice used by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe.

The Revd Anne Sardeson noted Synod Moderators and Synod Clerks tend to attend Assembly and asked if that will be the position moving forward? Is it anticipated that there would be a mix of long and short term appointees from Synods? Dr Bradbury noted that Synod Clerks had never been members of Assembly as of right but that most Synods chose to send their Clerks to Assembly as part of their Synod cohort. Moderators are now included in their Synod numbers.

Mr Steve Powell asked what consideration had been given to meeting by electronic means. Dr Bradbury noted the Assembly Executive in November meets via electronic conferencing. During Covid, Assembly met only via Zoom. He felt an embodied faith necessitated the regular use of embodied Assemblies. Dr Bradbury advised that online meetings did not reduce the administrative input required.

The Moderator remaindered this item of business.

18 Announcement of General Assembly Moderator for 2026/7

Dr Bradbury announced that Assembly had elected the Revd Neil Thorogood to serve as Moderator of General Assembly from the close of General Assembly 2026.

Session 6 Saturday 5th July 16.30 - 18.30

19 Ecumenical pilgrimage

The Moderator invited the Revds Philip Brooks and Kevin Snyman to address Assembly. A video was shown, made by Mr Snyman, showing an ecumenical pilgrimage by members of the URC, the Methodist Church, and the Church of Scotland to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. The Moderator invited the chaplain to lead it in prayer and then thanked Mr Brooks and Mr Snyman for the film.

20 Paper ADH1-BC|E&L|RC – Resource Centre Learning Review 1

The Moderator invited the Revd Jenny Mills and the Revd Mary Thomas to present paper ADH1-BC|E&L| RC and Resolution 13.

Questions for Clarification

The Revd Janet Sutton asked about the term RCL and whether it referred to the people and delivery of learning or to the building in which the learning is delivered. Dr Bradbury clarified that the term referred to three institutions which the General Assembly has chosen to partner with.

Resolution 13

Assembly endorses the findings and themes from the Education and Learning Consultation, and instructs the working group and others to enact the outcomes listed in section four. Assembly instructs Business Committee, Faith in Action Committee, and Ministries Committee to report back to General Assembly 2026 with an update on progress.

The resolution passed unanimously.

21 Return to Paper A4-Business Committee – Reducing the size of General Assembly

The Moderator returned Assembly to paper A4 and invited Dr Bradbury to continue the dialogue. Dr Bradbury outlined various suggestions which had arisen from the group discussions regarding an “option C”.

Jay Tyan asked about the age limit for youth reps when an Assembly period would cover two academic years. Dr Bradbury suggested detail regarding terms of service/alternates/consistency etc would be thrashed out once the general pattern for the future size of General Assembly had been discerned.

A lively discussion ensued.

The Moderator remaindered this item of business.

22 Parallel Sessions

After dinner Assembly met in Parallel Sessions:

A. Safeguarding Committee, Mission Committee, Nominations Committee.
Chaired by the Revd Dr Michael Jagessar

B. Ministries Committee & Resources Committee.
Chaired by the Revd David Grosch-Miller

C. Children’s & Youth Work Committee & Education and Learning
Chaired by the Revd Dr Stephen Orchard

Assembly was invited to participate in Evening prayer through prayer stations.

Session 7 Sunday 6th July 09.00 - 11.30

The Moderator invited the chaplains and Dr Francesca Nuzzolese to lead Assembly in Bible Study.

23 Church Life Review (CLR) – Progress and local church perspective

The Moderator invited the Revd Steven Faber and Ms Elizabeth Hall, members of the CLR steering group, to update Assembly on the progress of the CLR process. In particular Mr Faber highlighted the consultative gatherings of different church role holders e.g. treasurers that occurred over the year; advised Assembly of the proposed creation of a centralised denominational online up to date Resource Portal which aims to share style documents, assist with governance compliance, offer advice etc; the ongoing exploration of what shared services could happen across Synod/Churches; the employment of lay people; and the exploration of new communities of worship and discipleship. Practical hypothetical examples of what CLR might do for local churches were provided to highlight the above.

The Moderator invited the chaplains to lead Assembly in worship

Session 8 Sunday 6th July 12.00 - 13.00

24 Presentation by Dr Francesca Nuzzolese

The Moderator, the Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe, took the chair and invited Dr Francesca Nuzzolese to address Assembly. Dr Nuzzolese spoke on the theme of “Intersectional Journeys” exploring the rich tapestry of experiences which led to her serving now as a professor of Practical Theology at the Waldensian Seminary in Rome.

25 Minutes of General Assembly for Friday 4th July

The Clerk presented the minutes of Assembly for Friday 4th July which were adopted as an accurate record.

26 I2-Mission Committee – Missional Lens paper

The Moderator invited Ms Sarah Lane Cawte and the Revd Philip Brooks to present Paper I2 and Resolutions 32 and 32A

Questions for Clarification

Ms Clare Nutbrown-Hughes asked about racial injustice noting the resolution included reparations and transatlantic slavery and enquired where it fitted into Commitment for Life and whether this would tie into climate injustice and poverty. Mr Brooks responded noting that the Resolution draws into one place various commitments Assembly has made over the last four years. The details of how the goals will be met are outlined in previous reports and resolutions.

The Revd Catherine McFie highlighted General Assembly 2023’s commitment to deliver mandatory anti racism training to all those in leadership roles and requested an update re the roll out of the training. She further asked about the call to action and whether there is an expectation that the Resolution is to influence Synods and local churches and what resources would be available to facilitate this. Mr Brooks noted how enthusiastic people had been to attend the anti racism training and noted that a good start has been made in training various groups but the next stage is how this will be rolled out across the URC. Mr Brooks noted that further resources need to be rolled out to assist local churches and Synods.

Mr Jamie Laird wondered how success would be measured at the end of the four year period and how the denomination will be held accountable for meeting the goals or not. Mr Brooks referred Mr Laird to the original resolutions which contained the practical outworkings.

Ms Charlotte Samson noted the mission lens plan was only for four years and enquired what would happen if goals are not achieved within 4 years and asked if an unobtained goal could be taken forward into the next period. Mr Brooks noted it will be for the Assembly to decide what to do at the end of the designated period.

Mr Reuben Watt noted point d concerned ecumenical vision and resource sharing and asked about whether interfaith working had been considered. Ms Lane Cawte highlighted that Assembly has not had the opportunity to consider interfaith working in this way (as this

resolution brought together previous ones brought by the Mission Committee and agreed by previous Assemblies).

Mr Gordon Woods enquired as to how the various resolutions had been selected. He noted that a recent resolution of Assembly, which affirmed the dignity of Trans and non Binary people, had not been included. Ms Lane Cawte noted that this resolution was the bringing together of Mission Committee resolutions and did not include those brought by other committees.

The Revd Tom Osborne wondered how these resolutions could be externally communicated and suggested they should be in a more concise form (in the way that the Methodist Church does). Mr Brooks noted this would be a useful next step and felt the URC could learn from the Methodists in this area.

Ms Kate Hunt noted the poverty commitment and enquired whether it would include those marginalised in other ways. Mr Brooks highlighted that the content of the previous North Western Synod's resolution provided the substance of what would be worked on.

The Revd Nigel Uden asked why evangelism was not included. Ms Lane Cawte explained this was because no resolution on evangelism had been brought to recent Assemblies and could therefore not be included; she did note, however, that work has been done on evangelism previously and highlighted that resolution 32A was seeking further work be undertaken.

The Moderator remaindered this business and adjourned Assembly for lunch.

Session 9 Sunday 6th July 14.00 - 15.30

27 Paper ADH2-BC|E&L|RC – Resource Centre Learning Review 2

The Moderator, the Revd Tim Meadows, took the chair and invited the General Secretary, the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith, and the Treasurer, Mr Alan Yates to introduce Paer ADH2-BC | E&L | RC and Resolutions 14 - 19.

Dr Bradbury advised Assembly that, at its meeting in February 2025, Assembly Executive had requested that the discernment process to identify appropriate Resource Centre for Learning (RCL) provision within the URC continue and resolved to adopt tighter timescales than had been originally suggested. It also requested options for dealing with the excess capacity in the RCLs. Dr Bradbury highlighted that the paper seeks to set a process for addressing Assembly Executive's wishes. He identified this was a difficult issue which would involve emotions and historic attachments but recognised that there is a need to move forward strategically. In summarising the proposed path, Dr Bradbury highlighted that Resolutions 14 and 15 outline principles which undergird a strategic way forward regarding both cohort size and finance. Thereafter, Assembly will be asked to adopt criteria to evaluate RCL provision, articulate the overall educational aims the Church should be fulfilling, and set a timetable for final decision making about future RCL provision. Finally, Assembly will be asked to appoint the Revd Dr Andrea Russell to serve as an external consultant to the process; Dr Russell has already worked with the URC in various consultations.

Ms Furley-Smith explored the importance of student cohort size in the formation of ministry students. She confirmed that the Assessment Board, on behalf of Assembly, is the body

that currently decides which RCL is the most appropriate one for each student to attend. This task involves consideration of the individual needs of the students together with the benefits of good cohort sizes. She advised that in recent years the total cohort size commencing the first year of training had ranged from 7 to 13. The cohort is made up of those who can study both full and part time and are able to do so on different times and days of the week. Assembly was advised that 11 students are due to start training in September with 5 destined for one RCL and 3 to each of the other RCLs. In the past an RCL has often had only 1 new student. The Assessment Board believe cohort sizes should be larger - recognising that the size directly impacts the quality of the formal and informal learning environment. Ms Furley-Smith commented that small cohort sizes are a disservice to the URC especially when students are, in effect, solely on individual educational pathways. A small, or even individual, cohort can lead to a lack of accountability. Larger cohorts help develop resilience in ministry. It is recognised that a good, diverse, cohort can aid the development of collegial working relationships which will sustain the student throughout ministry. Ms Furley-Smith acknowledged that when students are isolated, or there is a lack of a consistent cohort, the process of ministerial formation can feel fragmented and incomplete. Further work is, therefore, required to identify an optimal cohort size - Jesus had one of 12.

Mr Yates noted that utilising faith, hope and charity as guidelines in financial matters does not impress auditors. Mr Yates advised that he had used trends and data to produce a financial envelope to assist in understanding how much money will be available to support the RCLs. It was highlighted that the term "envelope" is being used as the church is not being asked to provide a budget or decimal point accuracy but to provide range and guidelines to help discern the capacity that can be supported. Mr Yates presented the costs attributable to the M&M Fund noting that other costs and income are available to some RCLs. The decline in the cost of funding students (due to lower numbers) is matched by the increase in the level of funding to RCLs. Mr Yates noted the number of students in EM1 (initial ministerial formation) has dramatically declined since 2002 from over 100 to just over 20 in 2025. Mr Yates emphasised that the M&M budget is under significant pressure and, therefore, Assembly is being asked if the RCL funding should continue to increase in the face of declining number of students. Mr Yates commented that Assembly had previously stated expenditure should be reduced by 20% to match falling receipts from churches and Synods. Given this, it is just that this figure should be the saving required in the education budget. Mr Yates noted two parts of the educational expense - an annual figure of £1m which is the desired budget in the future and income from the New College Fund which supports the educational work of the church. Should monies be used directly to help fund RCLs through capital grants, then less income would be realised to fund ongoing costs. Work undertaken with the Revd Jenny Mills highlighted that using more than a third of the New College Fund (which currently stands at £15m) would mean that not enough income would be generated towards the required £1m needed to fund EM1. He noted the funding available will support two residential RCLs very poorly but may fund one residential RCL very well.

Questions for Clarification

Dr Bradbury suggested that questions be taken on the paper and suite of resolutions as a whole and that voting, and discussion, be taken resolution by resolution.

Ms Alison Jiggins referred to 4.1 and sought confirmation that there would be a strong foundation in CRCW training. Ms Furley-Smith affirmed this would be the case.

Mr Zeerak Shahbaz enquired as to what would happen to students in training who are currently attending an RCL should it cease to be used for EM1. Dr Bradbury noted that students at colleges derecognised in the past had continued their training and it might be hoped that this would be the case in the future.

Ms Charlotte Samson asked if not using one RCL would free up more money for the other two RCLs. She also wondered if not using an RCL would restrict access to education. Mr Yates noted that if the church tried to continue to support 3 RCLs all would suffer; if the church focused on just 2 there is a greater likelihood that each would be better supported.

The Revd Janet Sutton noted that the resolutions appeared to concern EM1 only and wondered how the other accredited ministries listed would be affected. She also sought information as to what proportion of the funding is currently used to train those not in EM1. Dr Bradbury recognised these to be good questions but ones which are quite hard to answer given difficulty in apportioning activity and funding for a range of accredited ministries. He advised that much staff activity is dedicated to accredited ministries in the URC but calculating how much of the M&M fund is used for this is difficult. It was noted there are several funding streams for the various ministries and that Synod training officers also offer training for accredited ministries. The total amount of money spent by Synods is greater than the M&M budget. Ms Pippa Hodgson noted that work has been undertaken, through service level agreements, to obtain realistic costs from RCLs for each of the programmes mentioned in the report. Ms Furley-Smith advised that the Newbegin Pioneer Hub is funded through the Ministries Budget.

Ms Charlotte Remblance, whilst appreciating the concerns and cost implications, questioned where the voice from the RCLs was; she wondered if the work of the Church Life Review Group should happen before a decision is made about RCLs. Ms Remblance questioned whether this paper was a knee jerk reaction to finances. She felt the impact on educational partners should be taken into consideration too. Dr Bradbury responded that there has been an extensive ongoing consultation between the Education and Learning Committee and the RCLs which had not, in and of itself, arrived at a collectively agreed way forward. This failure to find an agreed way forward resulted in Assembly Executive requesting urgent action. Assembly advised that the RCLs were provided with opportunities to comment on an earlier draft of this paper with their responses, where possible, being included in the final version. The Church Life Review has been entrusted with particular tasks agreed by Assembly and Assembly Executive. It was noted that, at no point, has either body asked the Church Life Review to consider funding streams for Education and Learning. Dr Bradbury noted that an ecumenical impact is unavoidable. Ms Hodgson also noted that February's Assembly Executive received three extensive contributions from the RCLs. Ms Hodgson noted the contribution from the RCLs to this process had been to their detriment in terms of the amount of time and energy expended.

The Revd Karen Jones wondered if a streamlined RCL provision would continue to offer varied learning patterns in order to accommodate the different needs of ordinands. She highlighted that the move to EM2 provision being RCL based had not yet happened. Ms Furley-Smith advised that different patterns of training are reviewed regularly as is how the church can best support ministry. She affirmed that EM2 provision will, in future, be partly supported by the RCLs with the help of Synod Training and Development Officers.

The Revd Steph Atkins enquired about the cost differences between residential and non-residential training. She also highlighted the need to try and increase cohort size through

passionate and enthusiastic encouragement of people to candidate for ministry. Ms Furley-Smith noted that grants towards accommodation for those moving nearer an RCL equals the cost of accommodating someone within an RCL. She encouraged all to challenge suitable people to explore a ministry vocation.

Mr Jamie Laird pondered what the impact would be on others who use the RCLs for other training or residential events should the URC cease to use it. Dr Bradbury acknowledged it was very difficult to answer that question given each RCL is, and operates as, a separate entity with their own trustees, governance, and charity registration. If the URC ceased to use one RCL then its future would be a matter for that RCL's governing body (hopefully in conversation with the URC).

Assembly moved into discussion.

The Revd Tom Osborne noted the contraction of Methodist training, normally, just to Queens College in Birmingham had been very painful. He opined that Queens College would be a good place for URC students. He celebrated unexpected blessings when an RCL had ceased to be used for initial ministerial formation noting new life and opportunities for those institutions had emerged. Dr Bradbury thanked Mr Osborne for his comments.

The Revd Chantel Noppen underlined the need for, and importance of, offering a variety of ways to train for ministry and encouraged ecumenical training. Dr Bradbury thanked Ms Noppen for her comments.

The Revd Sal Bateman believed that the lack of ethnically minoritised members on the proposed working group undermined Assembly's previous commitment to reparations and decolonisation. Dr Bradbury agreed and highlighted that the tight timescales had resulted in a limited number of people being able to serve and hoped membership of the working group could be representatively extended after Assembly.

Ms Irish Sirmons observed that a major problem for the Church in general is the number of people leaving ministry. She stated that this requires addressing alongside issues regarding those entering training. Ms Furley-Smith noted this was a question that had arisen in the Ministries Parallel Session and agreed that the URC should rethink how it manages ministerial deployment. She assured Assembly that the Ministries Committee is contemplating how to "stop the leakage".

Pfarrer Martin Henninger noted the changes he had experienced in Westminster College in the time he had known it and highlighted his views on the advantages of having an RCL in Cambridge. The Moderator reminded Assembly that this debate is about the process rather than individual RCLs.

The Revd Siobhan Antoniou urged RCLs to continue to accommodate the individual needs of all students depending on their own personal situations. Dr Bradbury noted that the Covid Pandemic showed how quickly the URC can change how it provides resources.

Ms Maggie Kirkbride indicated concern about the future of lay training were there to be fewer RCLs. She sought an assurance that lay training will continue and be improved. Ms Hodgson provided that assurance and stated that it was envisaged that a reduction in the number of RCLs would not change the provision of lay training. Dr Bradbury noted that RCL staff are already engaging in lay training outwith the RCL buildings..

The Moderator remaindered this item of business.

Session 10 Sunday 6th July 16.00 - 18.30

28 Moderator's Address

The Moderator addressed Assembly about his year in office reflecting on the state of nations focusing on signs of hope and life in the URC.

29 En Bloc Business

The General Secretary, noting paper G1-URC Trust Accounts 2024 had been removed) moved the acceptance of the following items placed in en bloc:

- a A1-Business Committee
New Terms of Reference for Faith in Action Committee (Mission / Discipleship)

Resolution 1

General Assembly adopts the terms of reference for the Faith in Action Committee (Discipleship and Mission) as contained in Paper A1 of the July 2025 General Assembly.

Resolution 2

General Assembly delegates authority to take any necessary urgent decisions on behalf of the Faith in Action Committee to the three previous Committee Convenors (Children's and Youth Work, Education and Learning and Mission) along with the DGS (FiA), supported by the new Faith in Action staff team, until the new Faith in Action Committee is established in late autumn 2025.

- b A2-Business Committee
Terms of Reference for Ministries and its sub committee

Resolution 3

General Assembly adopts the Terms of Reference for the new Ministries Committee and its sub-committees.

Noting the following corrections

- 1. Page 56 6.5 is a repeat of 6.4. Delete 6.5 and adjust the number accordingly.***

Resolution 4

General Assembly delegates authority to take any necessary urgent decisions on behalf of the Ministries Committee to the two previous Committee Convenors (Education and Learning and Ministries) along with the DGS (Ministries), until the new Ministries Committee is established in late autumn 2025.

- c A3-Business Committee
Changes to Committee structure

Resolution 5

General Assembly resolves that from the close of General Assembly 2025 the Equalities Committee will become the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging sub-committee of the Faith in Action Committee.

Resolution 6

General Assembly resolves that from the close of General Assembly 2025 the Faith and Order Advisory Group will become a sub-committee of the Business Committee and be known as the Faith and Order Reference Group.

Noting the changed wording and resolution

1. Replace final paragraph as follows:

The Law and Polity Advisory Group used to be an advisory group of Mission Council. Since the demise of Mission Council, it has been floating somewhat free! It is proposed it become a sub-committee of the Business Committee, as that is the place where governance issues primarily reside. It is also proposed that it become the Law and Polity Reference Group. Technically, as a group with a number of practicing lawyers on it, it cannot offer formal 'advice' in the legal sense, as individuals are not indemnified to do so. It is a forum for pooling expertise, and one to which matters primarily are referred, rather than initiating work (as set out in its terms of reference). Therefore, it is proposed that it become a reference group – so that the name cannot give rise to any misunderstanding that it offers formal legal advice.

2. Amend Resolution 6 accordingly to:

General Assembly resolves that from the close of General Assembly 2025 the Law and Polity Advisory Group will become a sub-committee of the Business Committee and be known as the Law and Polity Reference Group.

d A5-Business Committee
Revised Terms of Reference for General Secretariat

Resolution 8

General Assembly resolves that the General Secretariat shall be known as the Senior Leadership Team.

Resolution 9

General Assembly resolves that the role of Secretary of Ministries become henceforth Deputy General Secretary for Ministries.

Resolution 10

General Assembly resolves that the Senior Leadership Team shall consist of the General Secretary, the Chief Operating Officer, the Deputy General Secretary (Faith in Action) and the Deputy General Secretary (Ministries) as of the close of the July 2025 General Assembly.

Resolution 11

General Assembly adopts the revised terms of reference for the General Secretariat as contained in Paper A5 of the July 2025 General Assembly.

Resolution 12

General Assembly delegates the responsibility for determining the make-up of the General Secretariat to the Resources Committee, to ensure that it is an integral and joined-up part of any future developments in the staffing structure of the Offices of the General Assembly.

e D1-Education & Learning
Discipleship Development Fund

Resolution 21

Discipleship Development Fund (DDF) small grants funding available to Synods should increase from £2,000 pa to £4,000 pa.

Resolution 22

The amount available to individual projects under the large grants scheme of the DDF should remain unchanged at £5,000. Normally, this grant will be available for up to three years, as before. However, a fourth year of funding may be given where clear succession planning is shown.

Resolution 23

A new category of awards from the DDF will be made available. A sum of £20,000 will be set aside annually for spontaneous discipleship development opportunities which arise at denominational level. Applications should be made to the Discipleship Development Fund Large Grant Awarding Group (DDFLGAG).

Resolution 24

Ongoing changes to the detail of the grants available through the DDF will now be delegated to the new Faith in Action Committee on the advice of the DDFLGAG.

f E1-Equalities
Equalities Committee Report

g G2-Resources
Resources Committee update

h H1-Ministries
Basis of Union paragraphs 19-24: Ministry in the United Reformed Church
(Resolution 26 paper H6 from GA 2024)

Resolution 26

General Assembly adopts the changes to Schedule A of The Manual with regards to Ministry in the United Reformed Church (paragraphs 19-24).

i H3-Ministries
Ministries General Report

Noting two corrections.

1. Page 144, 4.4 Helen Margaret Garton has not resigned from the Roll but serves the Methodist Church in Scotland.
2. Page 147 Margaret Winnifred Higton is training for Non-Stipendiary Ministry.

j H5-Ministries
Sabbaticals

Resolution 30

General Assembly agrees to ministerial sabbaticals being seven years from the previous sabbatical.

k H6-Ministries
Renaming of Models of Non-Stipendiary Ministry

Resolution 31

General Assembly adopts the following designations for Non-Stipendiary ministry: Non-Stipendiary Minister and Non-Stipendiary Minister (Local) for ministry of the Word and Sacraments and Non-Stipendiary CRCW and Non-Stipendiary CRCW (Local) for Church Related Community Workers.

l I1-Mission Committee
Mission Report

m J1-Nominations
Nominations Report

Resolution 33

General Assembly appoints members of committees and representatives of the Church, as set out in paragraph 5 of this report, subject to the adoptions and corrections contained in supplementary papers to Assembly.

Resolution 34

General Assembly resolves to dissolve the Panel for General Assembly Appointments from the close of General Assembly November 2025.

Resolution 35

General Assembly instructs the Nominations Committee to recruit a new Panel for General Assembly Appointments, in line with the constitution set out in the Ministries Paper H2 (General Assembly Book of Reports 2024).

n J2-Nominations

Late paper

o N1-Church Life Review
CLR Update
p T1-Safeguarding
Safeguarding Annual Report

q X1-Eastern Synod
Love's Farm Church - becoming LEP and local church of the URC

Resolution 38

General Assembly receives Love's Farm Church (LEP) as a local church of the United Reformed Church.

En bloc items were accepted by majority.

30 Celebrating Jubilee Ministers and greeting ministers new to their URC roles.

Dr Bradbury invited the Moderator to greet the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith as her role had evolved, through the en bloc business, to become Deputy General Secretary (Ministries). The Moderator and other members of the Senior Leadership Team greeted Ms Furley Smith. The Chaplain led Assembly in prayer.

Dr Bradbury noted that, in en bloc, business Assembly had admitted Love's Farm Church as a new congregation of the URC. A video was played outlining the work of this new congregation and the Moderator greeted the Revd Janet Sutton who has been working with this new congregation.

Dr Bradbury invited Assembly to celebrate the ministry of Jubilee Ministers:

Celebrating 70 years of ordained ministry

The Revd James Ronald Garfitt
The Revd Roger John Hall
The Revd Raymond Arthur Moody
The Revd John Brian Sturney

Celebrating 60 years of ordained ministry

The Revd Kenneth Graham,
The Revd Malcolm Gerald Hanson,
The Revd David Leslie Helyar,
The Revd Donald Horsfield,
The Revd Stuart Jackson,
The Revd Derek John Kingston,
The Revd Alwyn John Knight,
The Revd Nanette Lewis-Head,
The Revd Geoffrey Edward Hodgess Roper,
The Revd Jacqueline Mary Smith,
The Revd Keith John Spence,
The Revd Raymond Brian Woodcock,

The Revd Brian A Wren.

Celebrating 50 years of ordained ministry

The Revd Bryan Michael Alderson,
The Revd David Wilton Atkinson,
The Rev Stuart James Brock,
The Revd Martin Frederick Camroux,
The Revd Graham Carling,
The Revd Barry Edward Carter,
The Revd Gwynfor Berwyn Evans,
The Revd David Grosch-Miller,
The Revd Moira Helen Kerr,
The Revd Kenneth Orr Lynch,
The Revd Marian Horman McKean,
The Revd Robert Parker,
The Revd Jaroslav Raich,
The Revd Bryan Reginald Shirley,
The Revd Robert Wylie White.

The Moderator greeted the newly ordained ministers and newly commissioned Church Related Community Workers that were present.

Joseph Amoah, Harrogate St Paul's,
Siobhan Antoniou, Reigate Park; Banstead; Dorking; Redhill,
Stephanie Atkins, Greater Manchester South Missional Partnership,
Julia Bartholomew, Old Colwyn; Rhos-on-Sea,
Stanslous Chatikobo, Trinity Church, Ashwell & Walkern & Sandon United Church,
Simon Cross, Hull Area: Hull St Ninians & St Andrews, Cottingham Zion & Newland,
Swanland Christ Church, Peters House,
Julie Jefferies, Prestbury URC,
Alecia Johnstone, North Western Synod, Chaplain at HMP/YOI Preston,
Maria Lee, Bolton & Salford Missional Partnership,
Kate Wolsey, Pembrokeshire Transitional Minister.

31 Paper I2

Assembly returned to discussion of Paper I2

Ms Sarah Lane Cawte asked the Moderator to see if there was sufficient Assembly support to take Resolutions 32 and 32A forward. The Moderator tested the view of Assembly using the consensus cards. Given the number of "blue" cards, Ms Cawte requested that the resolutions be withdrawn. The majority of Assembly voted to allow the two resolutions to be withdrawn.

Resolution 32 WITHDRAWN

General Assembly affirms its commitments to:

- a) address issues of racial injustice, including furthering the URC's commitment to becoming an actively anti-racist Church, and responding to the continuing negative impacts of transatlantic slavery;
- b) prioritise work seeking to recognise, address, and dismantle poverty in the UK;

- c) respond to the climate crisis, including accompanying local churches in their respective journeys;
 - d) reinvigorate our ecumenical vision through ecumenical working and resource sharing;
- and endorses these commitments as the denomination's 'missional lens', asking its Assembly Committees to use it as a focus in considering their work for the next four years.

Resolution 32A WITHDRAWN

(a) Following on from the missional lens endorsement and the recent increased focus by Mission Committee on evangelism, Assembly affirms the centrality of evangelism and faith sharing to the life of the Church. (b) Assembly invites the Faith in Action Committee to bring back to General Assembly 2026 proposals which would enable this to become more embedded with the culture and practice of the United Reformed Church.

32 Paper ADH2

Assembly returned to discussion on paper ADH2 resolution by resolution.

Resolution 14

Ms Lucy Cooke felt that reducing the numbers of RCLs may run the risk of discouraging a wide range of people to study thus diminishing URC future ministry.

The Revd Jo Clare-Young urged Assembly to ensure that whatever the future RCL provision may be is as inclusive as possible in terms of diversity, worship style and theology. Dr Bradbury noted a need to ensure a diverse range of students can be accommodated.

The Revd Anne Sardeson mused that Queens College, Birmingham had been noted as a possible venue for EM1 training when Assembly previously had decided not to use this college.

The Revd Dr Susan Durber noted that Ms Furley-Smith made a persuasive case on the matter of cohort size but that this should be balanced with other factors such as geographical restrictions. She believed there are other ways of handling the cohort size. She expressed concern that passing Resolution 14 would lock the RCLs into competition before the task force had completed its work. Dr Bradbury noted that the numbers of students are key, highlighting that there are 11 new students starting EM1 in 2025 spread over 3 RCLs. Dr Bradbury noted that a process to find a way forward commenced in 2019, and that whilst there was a profound hope that another way through could be found, the process sadly had not provided a viable solution. He emphasised that Assembly Executive had been insistent that a viable solution be found. This resolution would define the task that the Working Group must follow. He urged Assembly to support the resolution.

The Revd Dr Simon Cross recognised the necessity of perishing for the emergence of new things but had concerns about preserving the distinctiveness of the Reformed context in the wider ecumenical mix. He felt that the Church stood to lose a great deal if it reduced its RCL numbers. Dr Bradbury noted that each of our RCLs make distinctive offerings; most of our students follow the University of Durham's Common Awards programme for initial ministerial education.

The Revd Liz Adams expressed sadness that the church could not offer a varied and diverse programme in EM1. She submitted that it would be easier for Assembly to make a decision if it knew the distinct offerings of each RCL. Dr Bradbury noted the resolutions sought to frame the process which should hopefully allow Assembly to identify and understand the offerings of each RCL. Any final decision would be one for General Assembly to take.

The Revd David Grosch Miller reminded Assembly of a decision in 1973 in which the General Assembly reduced the number of colleges it needed. He felt that it is impossible to know what the future needs of the church will be given the nature of ministry will change radically in the next 5 years and the church needs a flexible and adaptable approach. Dr Bradbury noted it is possible, even in just one institution, to be flexible and offer a diversity of approach.

The Revd Daniel Harris noted his experience of being at Westminster when student numbers drastically fell and how difficult this was. He felt a need to reexamine how the church trains ministers. Dr Bradbury thanked Mr Harris for recognition of the pain that is present in many aspects of contemporary church life. He noted that the more that is spent centrally diminishes the amount available for local church ministry. He commented that the reality of church life is hard at the moment.

The Moderator reminded Assembly to bring diverse opinions and comments and not to repeat comments already made.

The Revd Dr Stephen Orchard noted that much had been said about the diversity of colleges but he felt the students were wonderful and similar. He noted that Assembly should not run away from this decision. He noted the finances are unsustainable. He noted the RCL discussion is about EM1 not about closure of colleges per se as they can find new ways to serve the Church.

The Revd Sal Bateman was concerned about limiting the consideration of the task group as the resolution notes an intention to cease using at least one RCL. Dr Bradbury noted the term “at least” gave flexibility. Dr Bradbury gave an assurance that the resolution’s wording was not intended to theoretically limit options.

The Revd Dr Romilly Micklem moved a change in words to amend Resolution 14 to read:

General Assembly determines to cease using at least one RCL for the delivery of EM1 from September 2026 for new EM1 students.

The Revd Dr John Scott noted that new EM1 students were told that there was a review of RCL provision and did not wish to tie the hands of the colleges in such an amendment.

The Revd Dr Michael Hopkins, whilst agreeing with Dr Scott’s comment, felt that it was not germane to the amendment.

Assembly agreed, by majority, to the amended resolution becoming the substantive resolution 14.

Resolution 14

General Assembly determines to cease using at least one RCL for the delivery of EM1 from September 2026 for new EM1 students.

The resolution carried by majority.

Resolution 15

The Revd Nigel Uden asked if it was permissible for the RCLs to approach other sources of funding (including Synods) to secure capital and ongoing expenditure. Mr Yates responded observing that the General Assembly has no authority to prevent RCLs doing so, and noting the necessity of fund raising but felt Synod Trusts had many demands on their resources.

The Revd Dr Romilly Micklem questioned the perception that Synod funds were readily available and described the issues facing one Synod Trust Company which limit its ability to use its financial resources in support of the wider church.

The Revd Fran Kissack expressed confusion about the wording of the report which suggests that funding given to RCLs comes solely from the M&M fund when in reality it is from a wide range of sources. Mr Yates commented that the wording sought to refer to funding provided directly to students and the RCLs from the M&M fund.

Resolution 15

General Assembly adopts the financial 'envelope' within which funding for EM1 and RCLs must be delivered from the M&M fund.

This Resolution carried by majority.

Resolution 16

The Revd Neil Thorogood commented that there are a variety of ways in which initial ministerial formation can take place. He also felt that an educational ecology which allows future theological educators to grow is required within the denomination. He urged a close eye be kept on maintaining and preserving that ecology. Dr Bradbury thanked Mr Thorogood for his contribution; hoping that the criteria in the resolution allow such an ecology. Dr Bradbury noted that the ecology is not just the URC institutions but will include universities and global networks. Dr Bradbury added that we can no longer rely on universities to provide what we have relied on in the past with a lowering profile of Christian theology within university departments.

Mr Jamie Laird proposed an amendment to add brackets around the letter s in "RCLs". However, following advice from the Clerk, Mr Laird withdrew his amendment on assurance that the Resolution did not limit the criteria to a particular number of RCLs.

Ms Alison Jiggins highlighted that it does not follow that because something is cheaper it is necessarily of poorer quality. She expressed concern that the church may lose more than it realised if care was not exercised. She hoped for better and clearer information to assist the final decision making. Dr Bradbury said that that the next stage of the process would

be an evaluation of what the RCLs might offer, recognising the variety and diversity between them.

Ms Clare Nutbrown-Hughes noted that “community development” was missing from the criteria and urged for it to be included. Dr Bradbury noted the report cannot be changed but emphasised that community development was implicit in the paper.

The Revd Alison Micklem moved the resolution be now put, seconded by the Revd Dr Romilly Micklem. The procedural resolution that resolution 15 be now put was carried.

Resolution 16

General Assembly adopts the criteria set out at 4.1 in the report as the criteria which are to be used in making determinations about which RCLs will continue to offer EM1.

This resolution was carried unanimously.

Resolution 17

The Revd David Salisbury asked if Assembly was discussing the use of RCLs purely for EM1 or their use generally. Dr Bradbury highlighted this was complicated given the possibility that an RCL in future may not be used for EM1 but may offer training outwith the EM1 programme.

Ms Catriona Wheeler pointed out that in the interests of consistency, the resolution needed to include reference to the relevant section of the report which in this case was section 7. Assembly agreed to this being recorded administratively.

Resolution 17

General Assembly adopts the key aims set out in section 7 of the report for the future use of RCLs within the life of the United Reformed Church.

This resolution was carried unanimously.

Resolution 18

General Assembly adopts the timetable for decision making as set out in section 8 of the report.

This resolution was carried unanimously.

Resolution 19

General Assembly invites the Revd Dr Andrea Russell to serve as an external consultant in the engagement of the working group with the RCLs.

This resolution was carried unanimously.

33 In Memoriam

Assembly gave thanks for the lives of the following ministers who had died in the last year.

The Revd Gwendoline Mary Barr
The Revd George Clifford Graham Bembridge
The Revd Ian Keith Bird
The Revd William Allan Blue
The Revd Roy Patrick Bones
The Revd Mair Bradley
The Revd Georgina Anne Brotherton
The Revd Mary Elizabeth Burgess
The Revd Anthony John Coates
The Revd Brian Coward
The Revd James Windsor Gould
The Revd Alison Frances Hall
The Revd Anthony Paul Haws
The Revd Michael Edmund Heard
The Revd John Heywood-Thomas
The Revd Colin Joseph Hunt
The Revd Frederick Gerald Jackson
The Revd Michael Raybould Jackson
The Revd Norma Johnson
The Revd Ian John Kirby
The Revd Margaret Elizabeth Laurie
The Revd Patrick Stanley George Lidgett
The Revd Alexander David Mabbs
The Revd Donald Norman Macarthur
The Revd Henry Roy Martin
The Revd James Martin
The Revd John Martin
The Revd Robert John McKelvey
The Revd Greta M Morgan
The Revd William James Nicol
The Revd Michael Potter
The Revd Howard Reginald William Rady
The Revd Colin Edward Claridge Richards
The Revd Timothy Richards
The Revd John Joseph Roche
The Revd Patrice Ernestine Phyllis Sessions
The Revd John Francis Slow
The Revd John Iain Stewart
The Revd Kenneth John Summers
The Revd Dean Edward Tapley
The Revd Brian John Townsend
The Revd Bruce Samuel Upperton
The Revd David Roy Viles
The Revd John David Walker
The Revd Janet Waldron Marian Webber
The Revd Katherine Susan White
The Revd Mark Wilson
The Revd Eric Peter Maurice Wollaston

General Assembly recognised the Churches that had closed since the previous report. It gave thanks to God for the worship and witness offered by these fellowships across the years.

Synod 1 – Northern Synod

Christ Church Stanley United Reformed Church, Stanley, County Durham,
25 December 2024

West Denton United Reformed Church, Newcastle upon Tyne,
24 March 2025

Synod 2 – North Western Synod

Besses o' th' Barn United Reformed Church, Bury, Greater Manchester,
29 June 2024

Blackford Bridge United Reformed Church, Bury, Greater Manchester,
25 January 2025

Synod 3 – Mersey Synod

Trinity Widnes (Methodist/URC), Widnes, Cheshire,
30 August 2024

Oakvale United Reformed Church, Liverpool,
3 August 2024

Synod 4 – Yorkshire Synod

Brackenhall United Reformed Church, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire,
30 September 2024

Flanshaw United Reformed Church, Wakefield, West Yorkshire,
15 September 2024

Luddenden Foot United Reformed Church, Halifax, West Yorkshire,
30 April 2024

Marsden United Church (LEP), Marsden, West Yorkshire,
30 March 2025

Synod 5 – East Midlands Synod

Carlton Road United Reformed Church, Derby, Derbyshire,
31 March 2025

Eastgate Bourne United Reformed Church, Bourne, Lincolnshire,
23 March 2024

Geddington United Reformed Church, Geddington, Northamptonshire,
30 January 2025

Kilsby United Reformed Church, Rugby, Warwickshire,
13 November 2024

Synod 7 – Eastern Synod

Christchurch Great Yarmouth (LEP), Great Yarmouth, Norfolk,
31 August 2024

Thetford United Reformed Church, Thetford, Norfolk,
30 November 2024

Trinity Norwich United Reformed Church, Norwich, Norfolk,
22 September 2024

Synod 8 – South Western Synod

Swindon Westlea United Reformed Church, Swindon, Wiltshire,

1 September 2024
Teignmouth United Reformed Church, Teignmouth, Devon,
1 April 2024

Synod 9 – Wessex Synod
Fordingbridge United Reformed Church, Fordingbridge, Hampshire,
15 December 2024

Synod 10 – Thames North Synod
Colindale The Hyde United Reformed Church, London,
20 April 2024

Synod 11 – Southern Synod
Eltham United Reformed Church, London,
31 July 2024
Lewisham, High Street United Reformed Church, London,
12 December 2024
Petworth United Reformed Church, Petworth, West Sussex,
30 September 2024

Synod 12 – Wales Synod
Bethesda Tongwynlais United Reformed Church, Cardiff,
31 January 2025

Session 11 Sunday 6th July 20.00 - 21.00

34 Paper A4

The Moderator, the Revd Dr Kirsty Thorpe took the chair.

Assembly returned to discussion of Paper A4.

The General Secretary sought Assembly's permission to change the text in Resolution 7 from:

Resolution 7

General Assembly instructs:

(a) the Clerk and the Assistant Clerk to draft amendments to the Structure of the United Reformed Church as proposed in model X and to bring those to the Business Committee for agreement pending decision by the Assembly Executive or the General Assembly;

(b) the Business Committee to do all further work necessary to enable the Assembly Executive or the General Assembly to adopt the proposals contained in model X.

to:

Resolution 7

1. Assembly instructs the Business committee to initiate a review and bring back

recommendations in July 2026, of the Functions of the General Assembly as set out in the Structure and in the light of this to bring recommendations regarding:

- (a) The functional relationship between the General Assembly and any Executive and/or Trust body.**
- (b) The size and makeup of the General Assembly and any Executive and/or Trust body.**

2. Assembly instructs the Nominations Committee, in consultation with the Equalities, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging sub-committee, Synod Clerks, the Legal Advisor and anyone else appropriate, to bring recommendations in July 2026 for the best practice of a safer recruitment policy to be followed by Synods as they appoint Synod representatives to the General Assembly to ensure diversity of representation.

3. Assembly agrees that, to ensure an appropriate size of the Assembly relative to the United Reformed Church as a whole, and the wise stewardship of resources, that for General Assembly July 2026, each Synod shall appoint 12 representatives to the General Assembly.

Assembly unanimously agreed to change the wording of Resolution 7 to the above.

Resolution 7.1 was carried unanimously after some discussion

Resolution 7.2 was carried unanimously after no questions or discussions

Questions re 7.3

Mr David Greatroux questioned whether “non Synod” representatives would be scaled down also

The Revd George Watt asked if the 12 Synod representatives was inclusive of 2 young people or not purple hair asked if the current position that those Synods who could not fill their youth posts could transfer to other Synods who could would remain.

The Revd Claire Downing asked if synod moderators were to be counted as part of the 12

The Revd Martha McInnes asked what the actual financial savings would be.

Dr Bradbury indicated that the structure allowed for flexibility re the number of Synod representatives hence the proposed immediate reduction of those without the need to utilise the cumbersome process of structural amendment. The other designated attendees in the Structure would not be altered at this time. Dr Bradbury highlighted that, through the change of the Committee structures, there will now be fewer Committee Convenors attending General Assembly so there will be natural reductions as a result. He admitted that the exact costs had not been established yet, but highlighted the savings to be made with fewer bedrooms and meeting rooms required. Travel costs should also be lower.

The Moderator expressed Assembly’s thanks to the Business Committee for their hard work in bringing a change to the working in this Resolution.

35 Minutes for Saturday 5th July

The Clerk moved the approval of the minutes for Saturday 5th July. Assembly unanimously voted to accept these as a correct record.

Session 12 Monday 7th July 09.15 - 13.00

The Moderator, the Revd Tim Meadows, took the chair and invited the chaplains to lead Assembly in worship. During worship a letter of thanks from the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar was read thanking the URC for recent financial and spiritual support. Dr Francesca Nuzzolese then led Assembly in a Bible study.

36 Moderator Elect 2026-2027 Acceptance Speech

The Moderator invited the Revd Neil Thorogood to address Assembly after his election to be General Moderator for 2026/7

37 Church Life Review Comments

The Moderator invited Assembly to return to the Church Life Review process.

Mr Mal Breeze noted that in the presentation Ministers of Word and Sacrament were mentioned twice. He asked about the place of Church Related Community Workers in the Church Life Review. The Revd Steve Faber responded that he could not see where he had mentioned either form of ministry. Mr Faber reminded Assembly of the Theos Report which had commended the CRCW ministry. Mr Faber informed Assembly that all forms of ministry are loved and valued in the URC.

Mr Graham Jennings asked how and when local churches will receive information about the Church Life Review so that they can prepare for November's General Assembly. Mr Faber noted the communications channels of the URC including News Update and Reform to help local churches and Assembly members prepare for November's Assembly.

The Revd Dr Romilly Micklem commented that a video is in preparation about the Church Life Review which can be used for every church - not just Synod meetings.

The Revd Chantel Noppen commented that as an ecumenical guest she will not be as well informed about the Church Life review and would find it helpful for a short potted history of the process to help. Ms Elizabeth Hall undertook that appropriate information would be communicated to ecumenical colleagues.

The Revd Simon Copley asked what happens after the November Assembly in terms of the process. Ms Hall noted that the process is really focused on getting ready for the November Assembly which will focus on the discussion and decision making process about work already undertaken and on further work at Assembly about further ways forward.

Mr Graham Jennings asked if the Steering Group could help local churches and synods on having a dedicated webpage which outlines the issues being addressed and papers about the Church Life Review. Ms Hall noted a page already exists for Church Life Review urc.org.uk/clr Ms Hall undertook to make sure this page is updated for Assembly in November.

38 Inclusive Church

The Moderator invited the Revd Chantel Noppen, National Coordinator of Inclusive Church, to address Assembly. Inclusive Church is a network of churches and individuals to encourage more inclusivity and accessibility in local churches. It originally started in the Church of England but is now ecumenical focusing on disability, sexuality, neurodiversity, mental health, race and ethnicity, poverty, class, women, gender and gender identity.

39 Deletion from the Roll

The Moderator invited the General Secretary to report on the Ministerial Discipline process. Dr Bradbury noted that, since the Assembly last met, one discipline case had concluded. This case resulted in the removal of Mr Naison Hove from the Roll of Ministers. The costs of the case amounted to £40,877

40 Minutes

The Clerk presented the minutes of Assembly for Sunday 6th July which were adopted as an accurate record.

The Clerk moved that the Officers of the Assembly be given authority to adopt the minutes of Assembly for Monday 7th July. Assembly agreed.

41 Thanks

The Moderator thanked members of Assembly and the staff in the offices of General Assembly for their hard work in preparation for, and at, Assembly. Mr Meadows thanked the technical team, the officers of Assembly, the musicians and chaplains for their work. The Moderator also thanked the ecumenical guests and the minute takers. Special mention was given to Sam Bircham who works hard behind the scenes at the offices of General Assembly. He also thanked Dr Francesca Nuzzolese for leading Bible Studies.

42 Address to the throne

The Moderator read the Address to the Throne which was adopted, my majority, by General Assembly.

To the King's Most Excellent Majesty:

The General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, meeting in Derbyshire, sends loyal greetings to Your Majesty. Grace, mercy and peace from God the Creator and Christ Jesus our Lord.

We recognise with thankfulness the impact of your steadfast and committed leadership on our nation and around the world, representing values of community, caring for the environment and empowering young people as leaders for today and tomorrow, while also encouraging faith and faith groups amid growing secularisation.

In a time of much change and global uncertainty, the United Reformed Church is reviewing and adapting its working to ensure we continue to be faithful in our calling to worship God, to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and to work for justice for all people and creation.

Up and down the country, through parties and through prayers, United Reformed Church congregations joined with the nation to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. The harrowing realities of war and destruction still raging not far from our shores, in Ukraine and the Middle East, and across the globe, still weigh heavily upon us.

We have listened to and amplified the voices of those enduring grief, trauma and terrible hardship due to conflict. The generosity shown by URC members through our appeals for Ukraine, Gaza and Myanmar has enabled essential help and support to be given to many who have been impacted, offered alongside our friendship, solidarity and prayers.

With several governments, including the Government of the United Kingdom, sadly reducing their commitment to international aid, the URC's global justice programme, Commitment for Life, continues its collaborative partnerships in Bangladesh, in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory and in Zimbabwe, in coordination with Christian Aid, and extends support to communities in Ghana, Jamaica, Lebanon, Syria and beyond. The United Reformed Church was honoured to take part in Christian Aid's 80th anniversary celebrations at Westminster Abbey this year, affirming a shared commitment to global justice and solidarity with communities around the world.

The General Assembly of the United Reformed Church this year has been privileged to host ecumenical guests from Ukraine, Hungary, Italy, Germany, France, as well as Church of England, Church of Scotland, Methodist Church and Baptist Union of Great Britain representatives, with whom we share much in common. The opportunity to listen to and learn from our Christian siblings, to support them and collaborate with them remains an essential part of our life and work.

We have voiced our support for the World Council of Churches statement of 24 June calling for an end to apartheid, occupation, and impunity in Palestine and Israel. The URC is unequivocal in standing against antisemitism and Islamophobia and has emphasised that our condemnation of the Israeli government and its military is in no way directed at the nation of Israel nor Jewish people. We are calling for a peaceful resolution to the continuing conflict through dialogue and diplomacy.

Fundamental to all that we do is our belief that every person is created in the image of God and therefore possesses inherent worth and dignity. Following the example of Jesus, who sat with the richest and poorest in society, who valued young and older people, who challenged systems of oppression and othering, who embraced the sick, the dying and those who have been marginalised, and who calls peacemakers 'blessed', we will seek to speak good news and to be good news for our neighbours near and far.

As we develop this work, we wish to assure Your Majesty of our prayers for health, wisdom and good courage as you exercise your responsibilities and commitments to serve and lead the nation through your voice, your presence and your example before the world.

“Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart: wait, I say, on the Lord.”

Psalm 27:14

Signed on behalf of The United Reformed Church General Assembly by

The Revd Timothy Meadows

Moderator of The United Reformed Church General Assembly

The Revd Sarah Moore

Clerk to The United Reformed Church General Assembly

43 Further Thanks

The General Secretary thanked the Moderator for his guidance and ministry amongst the URC over the last year.

The Moderator, the Revd Tim Meadows, invited the Revd Jane Wade to lead Assembly in worship during which the Moderator, Ms Cationa Wheeler, was inducted.

The General Secretary adjourned Assembly.

Standing Orders for the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church

1. The agenda of the Assembly

- 1.1 At its meetings the Assembly shall consider reports and draft motions prepared by its committees which include the Assembly Executive or by Synods, and motions and amendments of which due notice has been given submitted by individual members of the Assembly.

2. In-person, virtual, and hybrid meetings

- 2.1 A meeting may be in-person, virtual, or hybrid. The boundaries between these descriptions are not always clear. A generally in-person meeting may have a minority of members joining the meeting by virtual means. A virtual meeting may have some participants gathered together in one place. In any event, what is always strictly essential is that all participants, both in-person and virtual, can fully see and hear each other in all directions, and that the Moderator is totally confident that participants are able to see and hear each other effectively. The Moderator must also be content and comfortable that they can manage full and proper participation from all participants in the meeting.

3. Records of meetings

- 3.1 Any streaming and/or recording of meetings, including subtitles or captions, does not replace the formal minutes of the meeting and is not a record of the decisions made. Formal minutes shall continue to be maintained and retained.
- 3.2 Meetings should not normally be recorded, in order to comply fully with both safeguarding and data privacy policies.

4. Operating procedure

- 4.1 Meetings will commence when the Moderator opens the meeting, within the requirements set out in the Rules of Procedure.
- 4.2 At the start of any meeting the Moderator shall make reasonable efforts to confirm that any members attending virtually can see and hear, and be seen and heard. The meeting shall not start until the Moderator is so satisfied.
- 4.3 Where available, participants joining a meeting virtually should normally use video as well as audio. Where video is not available, or it is not safe for the attendee to use video, then audio only may be used.
- 4.4 The Meeting will finish when the Moderator formally closes the meeting.
- 4.5 All microphones should be set to mute at the start of the meeting, apart from the Moderator and any necessary technical staff. Microphones should only be unmuted when a participant is speaking.
- 4.6 The Moderator has absolute discretion to pause or adjourn the meeting at any time, and to remove any attendees from the meeting if their conduct falls short of the standards expected in church.

4.7 In all but the smallest meetings, it is helpful if the Moderator is not also the online host. The host may be a staff member(s) or volunteer(s) who are not a member of the meeting in the same way that such people may assist with stewarding meetings.

4.8 In any event, no technical failure shall invalidate any decisions made.

5. Attendance

5.1 All meetings are required to meet any previously agreed quorum, where such a quorum has been specified.

6. Interpretation of Standing Orders

6.1 Where the Moderator is required to interpret any Standing Orders they shall take advice from the Clerk before making a ruling. The Moderator's decision in all cases shall be final.

7. Presentation of business

7.1 All reports of committees, together with the draft motions arising therefrom, shall be delivered to the General Secretary by a date to be determined, so that they may be circulated to members in time for consideration before the date of the Assembly meeting.

7.2 A Synod may deliver to the General Secretary not less than twelve weeks before the commencement of the meeting of the Assembly notice in writing of a motion for consideration at the Assembly. This notice shall include the names of those appointed to propose and second the motion at the Assembly.

7.3 A local church wishing to put forward a motion for consideration by the General Assembly shall submit the motion to its Synod for consideration and, if the Synod so decides, transmission to the Assembly, at such time as will enable the Synod to comply with Standing Order 7.2 above.

7.4 A member of the Assembly may deliver to the General Secretary not less than 21 days before the date of the meeting of the Assembly a notice in writing of a motion (which notice must include the name of a seconder) to be included in the Assembly agenda. If the subject matter of such a notice of motion appears to the General Secretary to be an infringement of the rights of a Synod through which the matter could properly have been raised, the General Secretary shall inform the member accordingly and bring the matter before the Business Committee which shall advise the Assembly as to the procedure to be followed.

7.5 Proposals for amendments to the Basis and Structure of the URC, which may be made by the Assembly Executive or a committee of the General Assembly or a Synod, shall be in the hands of the General Secretary not later than 12 weeks before the opening of the Assembly. The General Secretary, in addition to the normal advice to members of the Assembly, shall, as quickly as possible, inform all Synod Clerks of the proposed amendment.

7.6 It shall not be in order at any time to move a motion or amendment which:

7.6.1 contravenes any part of the Basis of Union, or

7.6.2 involves the Church in expenditure without prior consideration by the appropriate committee, or

7.6.3 pre-empts discussion of a matter to be considered later in the agenda, or

Standing Orders

- 7.6.4 amends or reverses a decision reached by the Assembly at its preceding two meetings unless the Moderator, Clerk and General Secretary together decide that changed circumstances or new evidence justify earlier reconsideration of the matter, or
- 7.6.5 is not related to the report of a committee and has not been the subject of 21 days' notice under Standing Order 7.4, or
- 7.6.6 simply reaffirms existing work.

The decision of the Moderator (in the case of 7.6.1, 7.6.2, 7.6.3, 7.6.5, and 7.6.6) and of the Moderator with the Clerk and the General Secretary (in the case of 7.6.4) on the application of this Standing Order shall be final.

- 7.7 In advance of the meeting, the General Secretary shall, in consultation with the Moderator and Clerk, prepare a proposal for a Facilitation Group for that meeting, for appointment at the beginning of the meeting. Some or all of the members of the Facilitation Group may be called upon by the Moderator at any time to help the Assembly reach a mind upon a question. The Assembly may add or remove members of the Facilitation Group at any time. The Facilitation Group may consult with whoever they deem it appropriate. Draft revised wording of motions should be checked by the Clerk, and by the Legal Advisor where appropriate, before being proposed to the Assembly.

8. En bloc business

- 8.1 The Moderator, Clerk, and General Secretary shall together decide which items of business shall be taken en bloc. Placing business in the en bloc category does not imply anything about the importance of any item of business, merely that those planning the meeting think that it may be possible to agree the business without discussion. Any members wishing to have items removed from en bloc business should notify the Clerk by a stated time in advance of the meeting. If six or more members have so notified, then the business shall be added to the agenda of the meeting, otherwise en bloc business shall be voted upon without any discussion.

9. Business requiring discussion

- 9.1 It is not possible to use full Consensus Decision-Making during many meetings, since Consensus Decision-Making relies upon the Moderator being able to sense the mood of the meeting, and the members also being able to sense that and trust the Moderator, which requires senses not always available in online meetings or meetings with online participants. However, all meetings should still be conducted in the spirit and ethos of seeking consensus.
- 9.2 To ensure that all meetings always operate to the same procedure, noting the blurred boundaries referred to in Standing Order 2, all meetings will use the information session and the discussion session from Consensus Decision-Making, and then take a vote for the actual decision-making.
- 9.3 All decisions shall be made by vote, using the procedure set out in Standing Order 10. The Moderator, Clerk, and General Secretary shall together decide in advance which items of business require a simple majority, and which require a two thirds majority, using the principle that routine formal decisions such as agreeing the minutes of the previous meeting might reasonably be taken on a simple majority, whereas matters of policy require a greater level of support than a simple majority. This Standing Order does not override any other provision for a specific majority set out elsewhere in the Standing Orders, particularly procedural motions.

10. Information and discussion sessions

- 10.1 The first stage is the information session. During the information session, members of Assembly may ask questions only to seek clarification or further information.
- 10.2 Once the Moderator decides that the information session has ended, the Assembly moves into the discussion session, in which the substance of the matter may be discussed.
- 10.2.1 The methods used may include prayer, buzz groups, group discussions, speeches to the whole Assembly, time for thinking during a break, etc. The Moderator may invite Assembly to indicate opinions by the use of coloured cards at this stage or electronic equivalent, and shall ensure that the full ranges of voices are given opportunity to contribute.
- 10.2.2 Minor changes of wording may be agreed as the discussion proceeds. If a proposed change is, in the opinion of the Moderator upon the advice of the Clerk, a major change, then a proposer and seconder are required and it is an amendment.
- 10.3 When the Moderator senses that the Assembly may be ready to reach a decision, the Moderator shall state that Assembly is moving into the decision session.

11. Decision session

- 11.1 All decisions shall preferably be made by vote. Those participating virtually should normally use any built in voting mechanism in the software. In a very small meeting, where the Moderator can see everyone at once, it may be possible to resolve this informally.
- 11.2 Voting on any motion whose effect is to alter, add to, modify or supersede the Basis, the Structure and any other form or expression of the polity and doctrinal formulations of the United Reformed Church, is governed by paragraph 3(1) and (2) of the Structure.

12. Business and procedural motions

- 12.1 If notice has been given of two or more motions on the same subject, or two or more amendments to the same motion, these shall be taken in the order decided by the Moderator on the advice of the Clerk.
- 12.2 A report presented to the Assembly by a committee or Synod, under Standing Order 7.1, shall be received for debate, unless notice has been duly given under Standing Order 7.4 of a motion to **refer back** to that committee or Synod the whole or part of the report and its attached motion(s). Such a motion for reference back shall be debated and voted upon before the relevant report is itself debated. To carry such a motion **two-thirds** of the votes cast must be given in its favour. When a report has been received for debate, and before any motions consequent upon it are proposed, any member may speak to a matter arising from the report which is not the subject of a motion.
- 12.3 During the meeting of the Assembly and on the report of a committee, notice (including the names of proposer and seconder) shall be given to the Clerk of any new motions which arise from the material of the report, and of any amendments which affect the substance of motions already presented. During the course of the

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debate a new motion or amendment may be stated orally without supporting speech in order to ascertain whether a member is willing to second it.

- 12.4 No motion or amendment shall be spoken to by its proposer, debated, or put to the Assembly unless it is known that there is a seconder. The only exceptions to this are motions presented on behalf of a committee, of which printed notice has been given, and the procedural motions in Standing Orders 12.12, 12.13, and 12.14. The procedural motions in Standing Orders 12.12, 12.13, and 12.14 may be moved and spoken to without the proposer having first obtained and announced the consent of a seconder. They must, however, be seconded before being put to the vote, and precedence as between the procedural motions is determined by the fact that after one of them is before the Assembly no other motion can be moved until that one has been dealt with.
- 12.5 A seconder may second without speaking and, by declaring the intention of doing so, reserve the right of speaking until a later period in the debate.
- 12.6 An amendment shall be either to omit words or to insert words or to do both, but no amendment shall be in order which has the effect of introducing an irrelevant proposal or of negating the motion. The Moderator may rule that a proposed amendment should be treated as an alternative motion or as a further motion.
- 12.7 If an amendment is carried, the motion as amended shall take the place of the original motion and shall become the substantive motion upon which any further amendment may be moved. If an amendment is rejected, a further amendment with a different outcome may be moved.
- 12.8 An amendment which has been moved and seconded shall be disposed of before any further amendment may be moved, but notice may be given of intention to move a further amendment should the one before the Assembly be rejected.
- 12.9 The mover may, with the concurrence of the seconder and the consent of the Assembly, alter the motion or amendment proposed.
- 12.10 A motion or amendment may be withdrawn by the proposer with the concurrence of the seconder and the consent of the Assembly. Any such consent shall be signified without discussion. It shall not be in order for any member to speak upon it after the proposer has asked permission to withdraw unless such permission shall have been refused.
- 12.11 Alternative (but not directly negative) motions may be moved and seconded in competition with a motion before the Assembly. It shall be for the Moderator, on the advice of the Clerk, to rule when motions shall be considered as alternatives under the Terms of this Standing Order.
 - 12.11.1 When such draft alternative motions have been received by the General Secretary, the Moderators may ask the General Secretary to convene a meeting (in-person or virtual) of the proposers, to ascertain if it may be possible to agree on a single draft motion to put before the Assembly, or to clarify the areas of disagreement.
 - 12.11.2 If the Assembly has alternative motions before it, each proposer shall be given the opportunity to present their motion in an order decided by the Moderator.
 - 12.11.3 After any amendments duly moved under Standing Order 12 have been dealt with and debate on the alternative motions has ended, the movers shall reply to the debate in reverse order to that in which they spoke initially. The

first vote shall be a vote in favour of each of the motions, put in the order in which they were proposed, the result not being announced for one until it is announced for all. If any of them obtains a majority of those voting, it becomes the sole motion before the Assembly. If none of them does so, the motion having the fewest votes is discarded. Should the lowest two be equal, the Moderator gives a casting vote. The voting process is repeated until one motion achieves a majority of those voting.

- 12.11.4 Once a sole motion remains, further discussion is permissible and votes for and against that motion shall be taken in the normal way.
- 12.12 In the course of the business any member may move that the question under consideration **be not put**. This motion takes precedence over every motion before the Assembly. As soon as the member has given reasons for proposing it and it has been seconded and the proposer of the motion or amendment under consideration has been allowed opportunity to comment on the reasons put forward, the vote upon it shall be taken, unless it appears to the Moderator that an unfair use is being made of this rule. To carry this motion, **two-thirds** of the votes cast must be given in its favour. Should the motion be carried, the business shall immediately end and the Assembly shall proceed to the next business.
- 12.13 In the course of any discussion, any member may move that the question **be now put**. This is sometimes described as “the closure motion”. If the Moderator senses that there is a wish or need to close a debate, the Moderator may ask whether any member wishes so to move; the Moderator may not simply declare a debate closed. Provided that it appears to the Moderator that the motion is a fair use of this rule, the vote shall be taken upon it immediately it has been seconded. When an amendment is under discussion, this motion shall apply only to that amendment. To carry this motion, **two-thirds** of the votes cast must be given in its favour. The mover of the original motion or amendment, as the case may be, retains the right of reply before the vote is taken on the motion or amendment.
- 12.14 During the course of a debate on a motion any member may move that decision on this motion be **deferred to the next Assembly**. This rule does not apply to debates on amendments since the Assembly needs to decide the final form of a motion before it can responsibly vote on deferral. The motion then takes precedence over other business. As soon as the member has given reasons for proposing it and it has been seconded and the proposer of the motion under consideration has been allowed opportunity to comment on the reasons put forward, the vote upon it shall be taken, unless it appears to the Moderator that an unfair use is being made of this rule or that deferral would have the effect of annulling the motion. To carry this motion, **two-thirds** of the votes cast must be given in its favour. At the discretion of the Moderator, the General Secretary may be instructed by a further motion, duly seconded, to refer the matter for consideration by other councils and/or by one or more committees of the Assembly. The General Secretary shall provide for the deferred motion to be presented again at the next Meeting of the General Assembly.

13. Timing of speeches and of other business

- 13.1 Save by prior agreement of the Business Committee, speeches made in the presentation of reports concerning past work of Assembly committees which are to be open to question, comment or discussion shall not exceed five minutes.
- 13.2 The Assembly may meet in parallel sessions or breakout rooms to consider the past work of Assembly committees for questions and comments. Any draft motions arising therefrom must be dealt with in a plenary session of the Assembly.

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- 13.3 Save by the prior agreement of the Business Committee, speeches made in support of the motions from any Assembly committee, including the Assembly Executive, or from any Synod, shall not exceed five minutes per resolution, and in aggregate not exceed 15 minutes (e.g. a committee with four motions may not exceed 15 minutes), unless a longer period be recommended by the Business Committee or determined by the Moderator.
- 13.4 Each subsequent speaker in any debate shall be allowed five minutes unless the Moderator shall determine otherwise; it shall, in particular, be open to the Moderator to determine that all speeches in a debate or from a particular point in a debate shall be of not more than a different specified number of minutes.
- 13.5 When a speech is made on behalf of a committee, it shall be so stated. Otherwise a speaker shall begin by giving name and accreditation to the Assembly.
- 13.6 Secretaries of committees and members of staff who are not members of Assembly may speak on the report of a committee for which they have responsibility at the request of the Convenor concerned. They may speak on other reports with the consent of the Moderator. Staff should not normally seek permission from the Moderator to speak outside their area of responsibility.
- 13.7 In each debate, no one shall address the Assembly more than once without the permission of the Moderator, except that at the close of each debate the proposer of the motion or the amendment, as the case may be, shall have the right to reply, but must strictly confine the reply to answering previous speakers and must not introduce new matters. Such reply shall close the debate on the motion or the amendment.
- 13.8 The foregoing Standing Order (13.7) shall not prevent the asking or answering of a question which arises from the matter before the Assembly or from a speech made in the debate upon it.
- 13.9 An invited speaker, whether speaking to a draft motion or not, may address the Assembly for such period of time as may be agreed by the Business Committee.

14. Questions

- 14.1 A member may, if two days' notice in writing has been given to the General Secretary, ask the Moderator or the Convenor of any committee any question on any matter relating to the business of the Assembly to which no reference is made in any report before the Assembly.
- 14.2 A member may, when given opportunity by the Moderator, ask the presenter of any report before the Assembly a question seeking additional information or explanation relating to matters contained within the report.
- 14.3 Questions asked under Standing Order 14 shall be put and answered without discussion.

15. Points of order, personal explanations, dissent

- 15.1 A member shall have the right to call attention to a point of order, and immediately on this being done any other member addressing the Assembly shall cease speaking until the Moderator has determined the question of order. The decision on any point of order rests entirely with the Moderator. Any member calling to order unnecessarily is liable to censure of the Assembly.

- 15.2 A member feeling that some material part of a former speech by such member at the same meeting has been misunderstood or is being grossly misinterpreted by a later speaker may request the Moderator's permission to make a personal explanation. If the Moderator so permits, a member so rising shall be entitled to be heard forthwith.
- 15.3 The right to record in the minutes a dissent from any decision of the Assembly shall only be granted to a member by the Moderator if the reason stated, either verbally at the time or later in writing, appears to the Moderator to fall within the provisions of paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union.
- 15.4 The decision of the Moderator on a point of order, or on the admissibility of a personal explanation, or on the right to have a dissent recorded, shall not be open to discussion.

16. Admission of the public and closed sessions

- 16.1 Only those who are members of the meeting, staff members in attendance, or invited guests may join a meeting. However, a meeting in open session may allow guests or be shown as a live stream.
- 16.2 A closed session is one in which the business is highly sensitive. Only members of Assembly, the Legal Adviser, and any technical staff required to enable Assembly to function may be present. Neither content nor process may be divulged to non-members, save specific information authorised by the Moderator in consultation with the Clerk and the Legal Adviser. No social media in any form may be used during a closed session, nor to report upon such closed session. Any live streaming must be switched off. Minutes will be taken, but these will be held *in retentis* by the Clerk, and shall not be made available to non-members.
- 16.3 A closed session may be called for at any time in any decision-making mode, and voted upon by the Assembly, requiring a simple majority. This motion takes precedence over every motion before the Assembly. As soon as the member has given reasons for proposing it and it has been seconded, and the proposer of the motion or amendment under consideration has been allowed opportunity to comment on the reasons put forward, the vote upon it shall be taken, unless it appears to the Moderator that an unfair use is being made of this rule. Should the motion be carried the business shall immediately pause while non-members leave the meeting.
- 16.4 If a matter is known to be highly sensitive in advance, then the Assembly Officers, consulting the Legal Adviser if necessary, may announce in advance that a certain piece of business will be conducted in a closed session giving their reasons.
- 16.5 Members of Assembly who leave during a closed session may not be re- admitted.

17. Communications during the course of debate

- 17.1 The primary responsibility of members is to attend to the business and participate in the decision making. Those present must refrain both from posting on social media sites during business sessions and from commenting upon partially completed business. It is the responsibility of the communications committee's staff to make official announcements. This restriction is only in place when in session; those attending are free to join in the online debates during breaks and after the close of business in respect of business that the Assembly has completed. Everything written and shared on social media sites at any time is the sole responsibility of the author, and is subject to the same defamation laws as any other form of written communication

18. Record of the Assembly

- 18.1 A record of attendance at the meetings of the Assembly shall be kept in such a manner as the Business Committee may determine.
- 18.2 The draft minutes of each day's proceedings shall be made available in an appropriate form normally on the following day. They shall, after any necessary correction, be approved at the opening of a subsequent session. Concerning the minutes of the closing day of the Assembly the Clerk shall submit a motion approving their insertion in the full minutes of the Assembly after review and any necessary correction by the Officers of the Assembly. Before such a motion is voted upon, any member may ask to have read out the written minute on any particular item.
- 18.3 A signed copy of the minutes shall be preserved in the custody of the General Secretary as the official record of the Assembly's proceedings.
- 18.4 As soon as possible after the Assembly meeting ends, the substance of the minutes together with any other relevant papers shall be published as a "Record of Assembly" and a copy sent to every member of the Assembly, each Synod and local church.

19. Suspension and amendment of Standing Orders

- 19.1 In any case of urgency or upon proposal of a motion of which due notice has been given, any one or more of the Standing Orders may be suspended at any meeting, provided that three-fourths of the members of the Assembly present and voting shall so decide.
- 19.2 Motions to amend the Standing Orders shall be referred to the Clerk of the Assembly for report before being voted on by the Assembly (or, in case of urgency, by the Assembly Executive). The Clerk of the Assembly may from time to time suggest amendments.

Person responsible for editing document: *Clerk of the General Assembly*
Date of last revision: *August 2022*

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)	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>

Summary of content

<p>Subject and aim(s)</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Main points</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>Previous relevant documents</p>	<p>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):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
<p>Consultation has taken place with...</p>	<p>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).</p> <p>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.</p>

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.urch.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 Dunnnett, 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 Dunnnett and Ms Ornella Mbula attended meetings.
- 4.6. The CLR core staff team consists of Mr Myles Dunnnett, 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

Struggling with bookkeeping and need help?

Lacking confidence or funds to hire a family worker?

Where do I start with Health and Safety?

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

Sees spiritual need in under-served estate
APPLIES TO THE CHURCH LIFE FUND
New URC worshipping community established!

Attending a church overwhelmed with burdens?

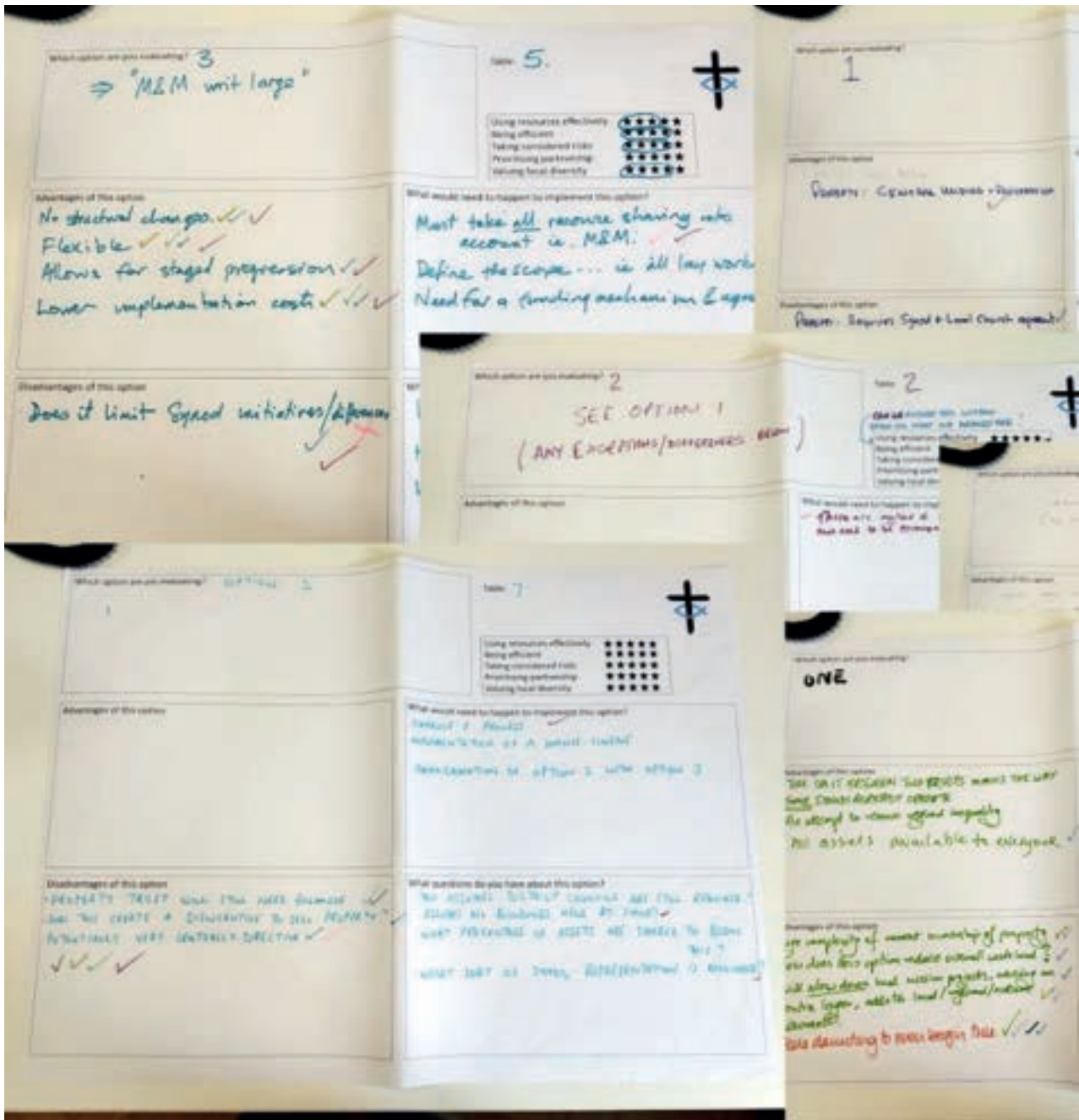
Attending a church overwhelmed with burdens?

The United Reformed Church
Church Life Review
www.urc.org.uk

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

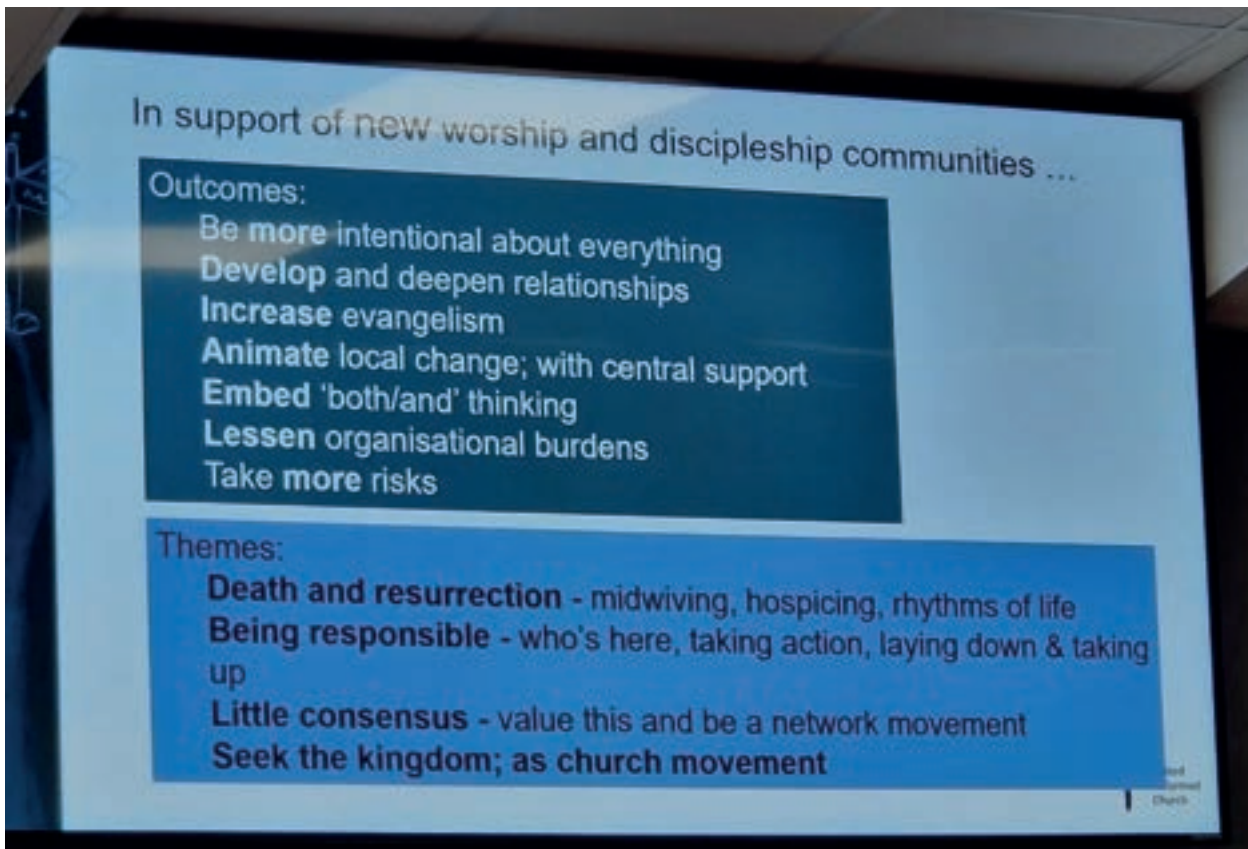
Resources Portal Operating Model: Initial Conclusions (Nov 24)

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



Paper A2

Proposal to establish a shared Church Life Fund

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)	<p>Resolution 5 General Assembly endorses the proposal to establish a Church Life Fund (CLF) and invites the URC Trust (URCT) to make necessary arrangements to implement the fund. Assembly directs relevant URC staff to support this process as required.</p> <p>Resolution 6 Assembly instructs Business Committee to initiate a review of the Church Life Fund after three years of operation, with outputs brought before Assembly in 2029 or later.</p> <p>Resolution 7 General Assembly invites synods, trusts, and others to make contributions to URCT to create a fund known as the Church Life Fund. It is proposed that any such funds will be donated by synods, trusts, and others and received by URCT on the following terms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The donations will form a restricted fund known as the Church Life Fund whose purposes will be funding new shared services and making grants for lay workers in local churches and new communities of discipleship and worship. - If the Church Life Fund shall be dissolved at any time in the future any remaining funds after settlement of all liabilities will be returned to the synods, trusts, and other contributors in the proportions to which they contributed to the Church Life Fund. <p>Resolution 8 General Assembly resolves that a Church Life Fund Committee is established, with a representative from every synod. URCT is invited to take advice from the Committee</p>

	<p>on the expenditure of the Church Life Fund and on request the Committee is authorised to provide such advice.</p> <p>Resolution 9 General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to publish criteria, which synods should use to make judgements about which applications to send to the Church Life Fund.</p> <p>Resolution 10 General Assembly notes the draft Terms of Reference laid out in Appendix Three, and instructs that relevant committees undertake the necessary work and bring back final Terms of Reference and proposed members to Assembly/Assembly Executive in 2026.</p> <p>Resolution 11 General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to make arrangements so that local churches and individuals can also contribute to the Church Life Fund. Assembly recommends that the Committee explores options for grants from external funding bodies.</p>
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To propose the establishment of a shared restricted Church Life Fund to resource the outcomes of Church Life Review phase two, in line with Resolutions 47 and 48 of General Assembly 2023.
Main points	<p>Executive Summary In response to Resolutions 47 and 48 of General Assembly 2023, this paper proposes the creation of a Church Life Fund (CLF) restricted to providing funding for shared services, lay workers, and new communities of discipleship and worship. The CLF will be resourced mainly by synods, held as a restricted fund by URC Trust, and overseen by URCT as charity trustee receiving advice from a representative committee to ensure transparent, conciliar decision-making.</p> <p>The proposal builds on proven URC precedents, avoids the complexity of new legal structures, and enables flexible, accountable resource sharing. A major review after three years will guide Assembly on whether to continue, expand, or conclude the fund. By pooling resources, the CLF will strengthen local churches, reduce duplication, and open new possibilities for mission.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolutions 47 and 48) CLR Shared Fund Proposal, January 2025 (Appendix One) Second Letter to Synods and Trusts, July 2025 (Appendix Two) Original model (January 2025)

	CLF impact model (September 2025)
Consultation has taken place with...	Attendees at the first CLR finance consultation in June 2024 Attendees at the second CLR finance consultation in May 2025 Synod officers, staff, volunteers Synod trust company convenors, secretaries, and where possible, trustees CLR Steering Group, Finance Working Group, and Sub-Committee URC Legal Adviser URC Trust Senior Leadership Team Business Committee Resources Committee

Summary of impact

Financial	URC Trust (URCT): URCT would be charity trustee of the restricted Church Life Fund. Synods: Financial contributions from synods/trusts are considered in Paper A11. Despite the significant contributions synods are being asked to make, it is expected that shared services will bring savings in other areas of expenditure. Local churches: The CLF will have a substantial and positive impact on a number of churches, including funded shared services and the opportunity to apply for grants for lay workers and new communities.
External (eg ecumenical)	Funded work will include new communities of discipleship and worship, some of which may be ecumenical ventures. More about this can be found in Paper A9. Grants for lay workers may also be directed to LEPs (Paper A8). LEPs will be able to access shared services, including the myURC resources hub.

1. Approach in this paper

- 1.1 The main body of this paper has been kept as short as possible to aid reading. To manage length and avoid duplication, commentary on comparators, alternatives, and justification is omitted. However, extensive justification and comparison is included in the original proposal, found in Appendix One, and the follow-up letter to synods and trusts (sent following the May 2025 Church Life Review Shared Fund Proposal consultation) in Appendix Two. A legal opinion from Mr Andrew Middleton is also included as Appendix Five. This paper must therefore be understood alongside its appendices.
- 1.2 This paper is structured around four core questions: Where did this proposal come from? Why should the Church Life Fund be established? What form will it take? How will it operate?
- 1.3 This paper does not address financial questions linked to the size of the fund (based on initial offers from synods). These matters are dealt with in Paper A11, which will be brought to Assembly as a late paper, to account for the outcome of Synod Meetings in October.

2. A collaborative process: Where did this proposal come from?

- 2.1. Church Life Review (CLR) Phase Two (Design) was tasked with exploring new models of financial resource sharing in Resolution 48 from General Assembly 2023:

General Assembly believes God is calling us to financial resource sharing across the United Reformed Church in accordance with the values and principles it has adopted. It empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to appoint a task group to:

- a) Develop a range of different models of resource sharing.
 - b) To carry out detailed feasibility work for each model.
 - c) To determine what structural or legal changes might be necessary to enable each model to function.
 - d) To evaluate each model against the values and principles General Assembly has adopted.
 - e) To report back, ideally to General Assembly 2024.
- 2.2. In the absence of a task group, the CLR Steering Group took on this role, and committed to find ways to consult widely.
- 2.3. General Assembly 2023 instructed that the evaluation of financial resource sharing models should respond to the following values and principles, outlined in Resolution 47:

General Assembly adopts the following Values and Principles as the basis for future decision making concerning the use and sharing of financial resources across Synods and the General Assembly:

Values

- a) As the United Reformed Church, we value conciliar decision making where we:
 - listen to each other, and the urgings of the Holy Spirit
 - act with humility
 - act with grace and generosity
 - seek to consider the good of all God's people, fostering obedience to the Gospel and furthering justice and climate care, rather than narrow self interest
- b) We believe that transparency about our decision making helps us be accountable to each other, and to God, whose mission we seek to serve
- c) We will use the charitable funds at our disposal lawfully and ensure the activity carried out with them is compliant.

Principles

- a) We seek to use our resources effectively
 - b) We look to be efficient, as part of our commitment to good stewardship
 - c) We will take considered risks for the Kingdom
 - d) We prioritise partnership within and beyond the United Reformed Church.
- 2.4. An initial CLR Financial Resource Sharing consultation was held in Bloomsbury in June 2024. This consultation brought together a group of synod officers, staff, and trust company trustees, along with staff from the Offices of

General Assembly and other interested individuals. The four options we explored were:

1. Amalgamation of all assets into central trusts
2. Amalgamation of financial assets into a central trust, retention of property in local trusts
3. A new, sizable fund which synods contribute to, out of which shared services, lay workers, and other work can be funded
4. Establishment of a cooperation agreement.

- 2.5. The primary outcome of the June 2024 consultation was the creation of a substantial new shared fund was the preferred model. There was little appetite for more radical options, like the merging of assets into collective trusts, due to the complexity, cost, and time requirements. The CLR Steering Group subsequently decided to set up a Finance Working Group to consider alternatives, comparators, and options, with a clear request to produce a report for the Steering Group by the end of 2024. Finance Working Group members were: Revd Dr Romilly Micklem, Ms Catriona Wheeler, Mr John Denison, Ms Faith Paulding, and Mr Chris Atherton. The group was co-chaired by Mr Alan Yates (finance) and Mr Myles Dunnett (process).
- 2.6. In December 2024, the Finance Working Group presented a proposal to the CLR Steering Group, which was accepted and sent to synods and trusts in January 2025. The proposal is attached as Appendix One. This paper is based on that original proposal.
- 2.7. The proposal was presented and discussed at the CLR Shared Fund Consultation in May 2025. Responses to questions and feedback raised at that consultation were communicated to synods and trusts in a letter sent in July 2025. The letter is reproduced in Appendix Two.
- 2.8. In summary, this proposal brought before Assembly is the outcome of an extended and complex process of collaboration, including two major consultations, as well as numerous meetings with synods and trusts, both in formal settings (Synod Executives, Synod Meetings, Trust Meetings) and informal settings (ad hoc conversations with treasurers and trusts, synod Q&A sessions for local church members, etc). The paper is based both on the original proposal in Appendix One (which follows the first consultation) and the follow-up letter in Appendix Two (which follows the second consultation). The Steering Group have also taken care to seek legal advice from Mr Andrew Middleton in relation to the proposed governance model. The legal advice can be found in Appendix Five.
3. **Purpose, principles, and use: Why a Church Life Fund?**
 - 3.1. The Church Life Fund (CLF) is proposed in response to work undertaken throughout CLR Phase Two (Design), responding to Resolutions 47-51a from General Assembly 2023. Resolutions 47 and 48 comprise the financial resource sharing workstream. The outcome of this workstream is the Church Life Fund, intended as an enabling mechanism for all other proposals. This is a significant development in the collective finances of the URC, and opens the door for a substantial portfolio of new activity.

- 3.2. The CLF would be a significant, accessible shared fund, providing expenditure for:
 - New, collective shared services in areas including accounting, buying, HR, IT, payroll, and a denominational resources hub
 - Safe and compliant employment of lay workers in local church roles
 - New URC communities of discipleship and worship.
- 3.3. The proposed fund is a model which builds on what has worked in the past, and avoids the complexity of more radical options like merging trust company assets into collective trusts.
- 3.4. The CLF is not intended to replace, supplant, or circumvent the Ministry and Mission Fund.
- 3.5. The Steering Group have agreed four core principles for expenditure from the fund:
 1. To apportion money across three areas of spend (shared services, new communities, lay workers)
 2. To do things well
 3. To evaluate work according to success criteria
 4. To work with honesty and transparency.

4. **Structure and governance: What is the Church Life Fund?**

- 4.1. A number of governance models were thoroughly explored – these were narrowed down to three options, which are explored at length in Appendix Five. Over time, the preferred model shifted from designation to restriction, as our understanding of the legal context evolved, and in acknowledgment of the need to give synods and trusts full legal assurance that Church Life Funds could not be reallocated for different purposes. This is why the original proposal, Appendix One, does not include reference to the final option being proposed.
- 4.2. The model proposed is that the fund should be a restricted fund, held by United Reformed Church Trust (URCT) as the charity trustee. This model is named as option two in the legal opinion in Appendix Five. As the charitable trustee, URCT will have legal responsibility for the funds.
- 4.3. As a restricted fund, donors (primarily synods/trusts) will have maximal legal assurance that the funds will only be applied for Church Life Fund purposes. The restricted purposes of the Church Life Fund fall within the wider charitable purposes of URC Trust.
- 4.4. The structure of the restricted fund proposed will not need to be registered as a separate charity with its own trustees. However, as noted in Appendix Five, as the fund is charitable it *may* need to be linked by the Charity Commission to URC Trust (written advice from the Charity Commission is being sought). The process of linking is not onerous and has no practical effect on the use of the restricted fund.
- 4.5. Restriction reflects a tested precedent: the Pension Deficit Restricted Fund was established in this way. As with the Pension Deficit Fund, should the Church Life Fund be closed, any remaining funds would be returned to donors

in proportion to how they were contributed, as a term of the restriction. Standard restriction wording will be circulated.

- 4.6. To enable good, conciliar decision-making, it is proposed that as a result of delegation, URCT will be advised in the use of the funds by a new Church Life Fund Committee (CLFC). This new committee will be fully representative of the URC, with at least one member from every synod. There will also be cross-membership between URCT and CLFC.
- 4.7. Regarding the governance body, Church Life Fund Committee, precedent exists here too. Although URCT would retain formal oversight as the charity trustee, cross-membership of URCT and the representative CLFC would ensure applications for funding would receive appropriate consideration. This would mirror the relationship between URCT and Resources Committee: Resources Committee advises URCT on the application of URC general funds held by URCT. URCT take this advice due to confidence in the Committee's process, on the basis of cross-membership and transparency. The same model is proposed here.
- 4.8. The potential for CLFC to take on governance responsibility for Inter-Synod Resource Sharing, replacing Resource Sharing Task Group, has been considered and discussed. It is not felt that merging the governance, even while keeping the funds separate, will be possible from the outset. Further work can be done once CLFC is established to assess feasibility of this governance merger.
- 4.9. The fund will be time-bounded to a ten-year lifespan, with a major review of its activities after three years. Based on the outcome of that and subsequent reviews, Assembly will decide whether to maintain, expand, or wrap up the CLF. This review will be independent of the CLFC, initiated and overseen by Business Committee, with at least one reviewer drawn from outside the URC's membership. Following the outcome of this review and Assembly's decision, consultation would take place with synods and their trusts. It is envisioned that, provided it is working well, the CLF will continue beyond its ten-year initial time-bounding.
- 4.10. A draft Terms of Reference document for the Church Life Fund Committee is included as Appendix Three. This document includes a diagram depicting the Committee's membership, prepared by Alex Clare-Young.

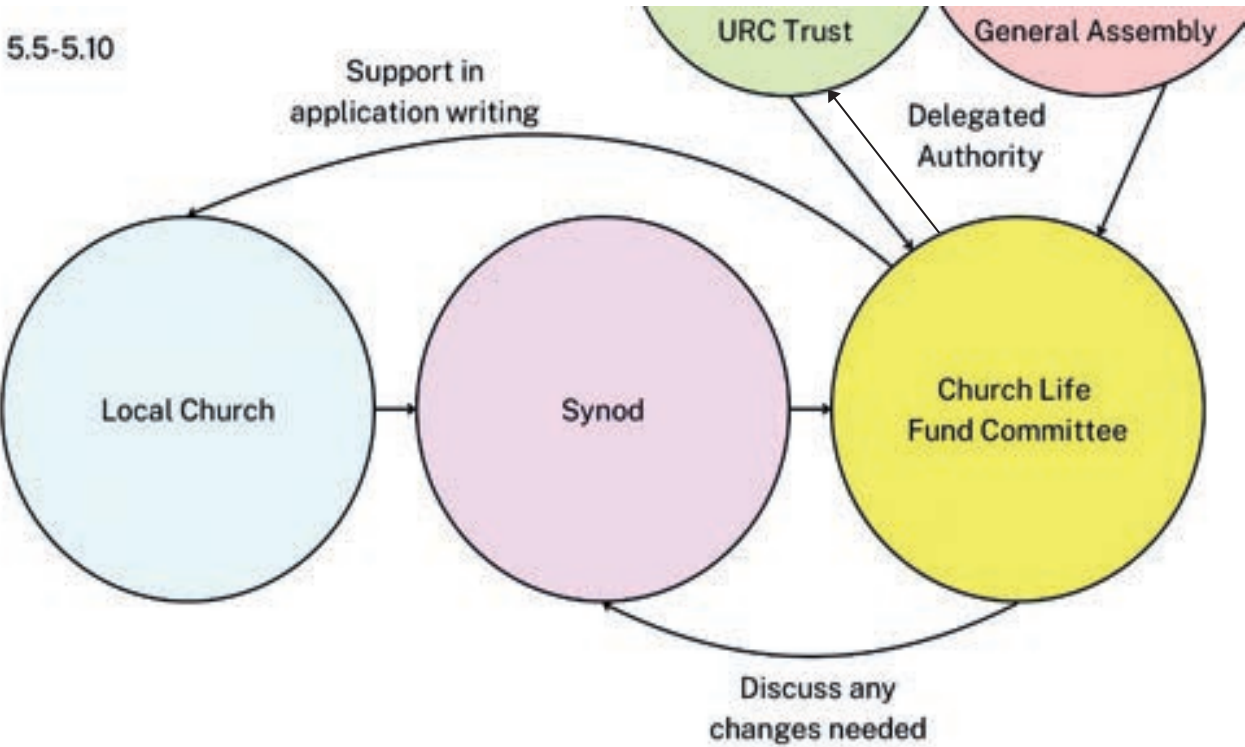
5. **Funding and expenditure: How will it work?**

- 5.1. The CLF will be funded by generous contributions from synods and their trust companies. The fund will be expendable, not the creation of a permanent endowment. An avenue will also be created for local churches who wish to contribute, as well as external bodies, although there will be no expectation that this will happen, and the fund's cash flow modelling will not rely on non-synod contributions.
- 5.2. It is acknowledged that the Church Life Fund will represent yet another call on synod finances, alongside others including M&M. M&M will remain the first call on the synods' finances, as it is for local churches. Offices of General

Assembly finance staff will find ways of working with synods and their trusts to coordinate the timing of contributions.

- 5.3. Funding for shared services will be the first call on the CLF, and will be consistent regardless of the scale of the fund. Lay worker and new communities funding will be dispensed on a grant-making basis in response to applications. Details for the processes under each funding stream are explored in subsequent papers.
- 5.4. Shared services will be available to everyone in the URC, including synods. Any church may make an application for a lay worker. Any area is eligible for funding to support a new URC community of discipleship and worship. The entire ethos of the fund is one of permissiveness, allowing new work to happen in new ways and in new places.
- 5.5. Applications for lay workers and new communities will be sent to CLFC by synods, on behalf of the local churches who wish to apply for funding. Local churches may not apply directly to the CLF without the support of their synod.
- 5.6. CLFC will provide synods with generic criteria, to help them decide whether or not to support applications to the Church Life Fund; synods may wish to add to these criteria, depending on contextual factors, e.g. the existence of a synod fund for certain grants. One of the criteria will be centered around viability, to ensure funds are being requested for churches in which they will make a difference.
- 5.7. Synods will be advised to support any application that meets all of the criteria. If, despite this safeguard, a synod-level decision is appealed, the process should follow the generic appeals process outlined in The Manual. Decisions of the Church Life Fund Committee will be made under the delegated authority of General Assembly and URC Trust. CLFC will liaise with the relevant synod if changes need to be made to an application. If issue is taken with a formal decision of CLFC, there will be a mediation process between the Committee and relevant synod.
- 5.8. All lay worker and new communities applications will be treated equally by the CLFC, regardless of their origin. Applications will be assessed on their individual merits only, in line with set criteria. Individual synod representatives will need to recuse themselves from decisions relating to applications originating from their synod.
- 5.9. All work will be evaluated according to success criteria. Success measurement methodologies for lay worker and new communities grants are set out in the respective proposals.
- 5.10. CLFC will offer support in application writing to local churches and those interested in starting new communities. The form of this support will be decided by the committee, and may be a volunteer network or paid role. CLFC will not directly employ any staff (either funded lay workers or internal administrative) and will assume no vicarious liability for any employment arrangement.

5.11. The phasing of contributions and awards means that expenditure is unlikely to match contributions year-by-year. This is addressed in Appendix Four.



Consolidated fund application process and governance model, by Alex Clare-Young

Appendix One: Original Proposal to Establish a Church Life Review Fund – CLR Steering Group and Finance Working Group, January 2025

Introduction

General Assembly 2023 asked the Church Life Review to explore new models of resource sharing (Resolutions 47 and 48). Following the CLR finance consultation in June 2024, there was energy around the idea of creating a shared pot to provide funding for the new ways of working proposed by the Church Life Review process. There was less appetite for funding options which involved the merger of trust companies. In response, the CLR Steering Group established a Finance Working Group to explore options for the new fund. Following extensive discussion of alternatives and comparators, the Finance Working Group and Steering Group have proposed the establishment of a new fund, similar to a substantially enhanced Inter-Synod Resource Sharing (ISRS) approach, out of which shared services, lay workers, and new worshipping communities can be resourced (in line with CLR Resolutions passed by General Assembly in 2023).

This proposal is therefore an initial vision, and a starting point from which wider consultation with the 13 synods and their associated trust companies can take place. Overall, this paper and associated funding model seeks to give synod trusts and General Assembly confidence that finance can be arranged to fund CLR proposals, in line with the values and principles set out in Resolution 47. Following consultation and refinement, this model could form the basis for the establishment of the fund. URC Record of Assembly, 2023, pp. 24-26, urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Record-of-Assembly-2023-web.pdf

What the fund will be used for

- Funding shared support services (Resolutions 49 and 50)
- Enabling the employment of lay workers in local church roles (Resolution 51)
- Resourcing the creation of new URC communities of worship and discipleship (Resolution 51a)
- Note that requests for contributions to the CLR fund will be separate from M&M, and any other extant or new funding streams. However, it will be important to synchronise requests to ensure that synods/trusts have full visibility of calls on their finances. An option to merge the governance function for Inter-Synod Resource Sharing (ISRS) with the CLR Fund is explored below.

Where the fund will be held

- It is proposed that the CLR Fund should be a newly established fund within the URC Trust, which will act as trustee. General Assembly will make arrangements for a CLR Fund Committee, which will have a representative from every synod, as well as a member/s from the URC Trust. The options for the specific legal model (i.e. the relationship between the URC Trust and the CLR Fund Committee) are explored in more detail below, in 'points for further consultation'.

Commentary: Other options were explored, such as establishing an entirely new trust or using a synod trust. However, neither option was as simple to establish or govern as using the URC Trust.

Allocation approach

- All synods can benefit, but it is anticipated that some synods may decide not to use the CLR fund for certain activities that they could cover themselves.
- To represent the church equally, the CLR Fund Committee will have at least one member from every synod, and will have a significant role in managing the fund.
- The Committee will make recommendations based on policy set by General Assembly and accepted by the URC Trust, to satisfy synod auditors of financial probity.
- Grant award requests and receipt will be conducted through synods, i.e. no application can be considered without synod support.

Commentary: Accepting grant requests directly from churches was considered, as this might be quicker. However, unless the synods are closely involved, vital information and context about the church(es) may not be available, and this may hinder the quality of the application. Various governance models were considered, but it was considered important that use of the fund is guided by a fully representative body.

Funding

- Given the pace of change in society and the Church, a capital endowment model is not appropriate. This proposal suggests a fund duration of 10 years.
- It is expected that the fund will still exist after that period, but its scope and purposes are likely to develop and change.
- Note that a shorter period of five years was considered but that was deemed to be too short for church planting (and similar) mission projects. However, this proposal calls for a major review of the fund after three years.
- Synods will be free to choose how they contribute, with options being a lump cash sum, ongoing cash contributions, or a hybrid model, within an agreed schedule of contributions.
- Synods will be able to make contributions on an ad hoc basis, e.g. following the sale of a property. It must be noted, however, that the preference would be for a clear schedule of contributions wherever possible, given the challenges of budgeting for 'windfall' contributions.
- Current modelling will be based on a fund providing annual expenditure values as follows:
 - Low: £1 million
 - Medium: £2.5 million

- High: £4 million

Please see the attached model for further information.

- £1 million represents a bare minimum figure, likely to be below the threshold necessary to make a meaningful difference or satisfy stated aims.
- The model accounts for synod contributions in four categories: minimum contribution, low contribution, medium contribution, and high contribution.
- Note that this modelling is not expected to constrain the development of CLR activities; it simply enables 'supply and demand' planning to take place in parallel.
- The model is also not expected to constrain synod contributions: synods will decide to contribute different amounts (and at different intervals), dependent on their ability at a given moment.

Expenditure eligibility

- An initial vision of early funding items includes:
 - A denominational resources portal
 - Funding for the employment of lay workers in local church roles, where they could not otherwise be afforded
 - New ways of working which emerge from the CLR's living labs, potentially including:
 - An advice phonenumber for synods to offer to local churches
 - Accounting software and support made available to synods to provide an accountancy service on behalf of local churches
 - Missional projects, for which guiding principles emerged at the January 2025 *Conversations at the Crossroads* conference
 - Other shared services which emerged from the November 2024 CLR Shared Services Consultation, and infrastructure needed to support them, including but not limited to:
 - Collective payroll function
 - Buying service for local churches
 - Shared car leasing provision
 - Local church websites
 - Shared IT infrastructure
 - Shared HR software and advice
 - Guidance on rent legislation.
- N.B. General Assembly asked the CLR shared services workstream to consider shared services for finance, safeguarding, HR, property, health and safety, and IT. Items may be added to the list above as the Steering Group have further conversations. Shared services would be optional, e.g. synods may choose not to make use of a phonenumber.

- CLR Fund expenditure does not represent entirely additional cost – there will be (potentially substantial) savings incurred by new models of shared service provision due to economies of scale, particularly in areas like HR.
- Items eligible for funding from a potential Community Enabling Fund would not be eligible for funding from the CLR Fund.
- The CLR Fund Committee may wish to establish a Sub-Committee to explore which activities to fund.

Costs and Savings

This table outlines some examples of costs incurred by the CLR Fund which may entail savings within synod budgets, particularly when linked to economies of scale. This list is representative rather than exhaustive.

Costs	Savings
Shared IT infrastructure	Replication of IT infrastructure across denomination
Resources portal infrastructure	Legal advice and other costs related to individual synod resources
Increased central payroll capacity	Replication of synod payroll solutions
Collective legal advice, e.g. for rent legislation	Requirement for synods to duplicate legal advice 13 times
Collective car leasing provider	Numerous lease providers
Collective membership of buying solution	Cheaper buying for local churches

Additional Costs

The following items of CLR Fund expenditure are additional costs, which may not entail direct savings within synod budgets:

- Resourcing new communities of worship and discipleship
- Funding for lay workers in local churches who could not otherwise afford them.

Expenditure Apportionment

The CLR Fund Committee will be responsible for producing an annual budget. The following outlines a potential apportionment for the fund's annual expenditure. A full

budget is not yet provided, given ongoing work around the cost/savings of shared services, and the potential resource requirements of new communities of worship and discipleship, and lay worker roles. Additionally, the focus of the fund is likely change over time, given initial costs related to setup of new shared services.

Pending further work, it is anticipated that roughly one third of the fund will be spent on shared services, one third on new communities of worship and discipleship, and one third on enabling the employment of lay workers to support local churches. Further work will be done, before and beyond the extraordinary session of General Assembly in November 2025 (into a potential CLR Phase 3 – Implementation), to assess the costs/savings and feasibility of new ways of working.

Strategy summary

- The fund would be established for an initial period of 10 years, with a 3-year review undertaken by General Assembly. It is suggested that this review should be laid out as an appendix when a CLR Fund Resolution comes before General Assembly, to give assurance that it will take place within the agreed timeframe.
- Setup would be undertaken alongside clear communications that the fund may well continue beyond 10 years (the 3-year decision-gate would consider three options: maintenance, expansion, or wrap-up).
- Requests for contributions to the CLR fund would be separate from M&M, and any other extant or new funding streams.
- A fully representative Committee, reporting to the URC Trust, will decide what to fund.
- If the fund is wrapped up, remaining assets will be returned to synod trusts in proportion to how they were given.

Points for further consultation (on 16 May 2025)

- It has been suggested by the Steering Group and Finance Working Group that the CLR Fund and ISRS could have a combined governance function, i.e. they would both be overseen by the same representative Committee, but would remain separate pots of money with separate purposes. A key reason for the retention of ISRS as a separate process is that without funds from that process, the National Synod of Wales would no longer be considered a going concern by their auditors. The CLR Fund Committee would therefore replace Resource Sharing Task Group (RSTG) as the group responsible for the ISRS process. This would avoid duplication of effort, allow better synchronisation of calls for funds, and may reset the ISRS process within a new framework of enhanced collaboration. This point is referred for further consultation.
- There is a need to clarify which council(s) of the church will be able to make applications to the fund, and which will be able to directly receive funding.

- It is suggested that the fund should be called the ‘Church Life Fund’ once it has been established.
- There are two viable ways to achieve the suggested governance model, given the proposed relationship between URC Trust and CLR Fund Committee, as follows:
 - The easier and preferred model is for synods to make contributions as general funds of the URC on the clear understanding that, although formally general, they will be ringfenced and designated as CLR Funds, to be applied for CLR purposes (which come within the general purposes of the URC). The URC Trust as the charity trustee of the general funds would be the charity trustee of the CLR Fund. The proposed relationship between CLR Fund Committee and URC Trust is that, in addition to a representative(s) from every synod, a member(s) of URCT will also sit on the CLR Fund Committee. This will ensure URCT have confidence and input into the advice CLR Fund Committee provide, and will give CLR Fund Committee (and by extension, synods) confidence that URCT will be able to act on the advice they receive. If necessary, members of the CLR Fund Committee could attend meetings of URCT on invitation. Therefore, although URCT would retain authority and legal responsibility for the management and administration of the funds, it would have confidence and input into the advice the CLR Fund Committee provided. This option would take significantly less time to establish, and would be simpler and more streamlined to operate, while achieving the same outcome (funding, agreed by a representative committee, for CLR activities) as option 2.
 - The alternative, more complex option, is for synods to make contributions on the understanding that their contributions would be formally (legally) restricted to the specific and agreed purposes of the CLR Fund. The intention is that those purposes would be charitable, which would then mean that the CLR Fund was a charity in itself. In view of the potential sums under management, the charity would be above the threshold for registration with the Charities Commission. As a charity it would need its own constitution and trustees, and could be incorporated or unincorporated. This model is substantially more complex, time consuming, and costly.
 - The agreement of synods, trust companies, and the URC Trust is essential. There will be time to discuss governance at the 16 May 2025 consultation.

Next Steps

The 13 synod trusts will need to reach agreement around the proposal. In order to reach a mutually agreeable proposal before the extraordinary session of General Assembly in November 2025, a second finance consultation is planned for Friday 16

May 2025. Synod treasurers and trust company conveners (as well as moderators) are invited to attend a consultation to explore, discuss, and refine the proposal alongside the Steering Group, Finance Working Group, and members of Church House and URCT staff.

This proposal has been prepared by the CLR Steering Group and Finance Working Group.

Steering Group

Steve Faber (Convener), Moderator, West Midlands Synod
Lythan Nevard, Moderator, Eastern Synod
Tim Hopley, Clerk, North Western Synod
Elizabeth Hall, Ministries and Learning Committee Convener, North Western Synod
Muna Levan-Harris, Legal and Trust Officer, Thames North Trust
Romilly Micklem, Trust Company Convener, Wessex Synod
Jan Adamson, Clerk, National Synod of Scotland
John Bradbury, General Secretary, in attendance
Myles Dunnett, CLR Programme Manager, in attendance

Finance Working Group

Chris Atherton, Treasurer, National Synod of Wales
Catriona Wheeler, Convener, URC Trust
John Denison, Treasurer, Southern Synod
Faith Paulding, Finance Officer, Eastern Synod
Romilly Micklem, Trust Company Convener, Wessex Synod
Co-Chairs: Alan Yates, Treasurer, URC Trust (Finance) and Myles Dunnett, CLR Programme Manager (Process)

[The 'points for further consultation' section of this letter has been amended to remove an incorrect reference to the Pension Deficit Fund.]

Appendix Two: Follow-up Letter to Synods and Trusts, July 2025

Dear Synod Officers and Trust Company Convenors,

Following our previous letter to Synod Officers on 10 June, we are once again getting in touch on behalf of the Church Life Review Steering Group. This letter relates to the proposal to establish a shared Church Life Fund, and follows the 16 May Shared Fund Consultation.

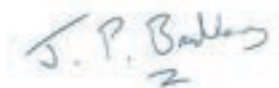
The final session on 16 May suggested that attendees broadly agreed on the principle and trajectory of the proposal, and were not opposed to the idea of establishing a Church Life Fund. Subsequently, the Steering Group have met to consider the outcomes, and agree that the original proposal will be retained in its current form. The proposal has therefore been recirculated for convenience.

This letter addresses many of the questions raised on 16 May. The Church Life Fund paper brought before Assembly in November will combine the key conclusions from the original proposal with content from this letter, to form the final paper. This letter and its enclosures are therefore intended to supplement and reinforce, rather than revise, the proposal.

As a reminder, Steering Group members are Steve Faber (Convenor), Elizabeth Hall, Romilly Micklem, Lythan Nevard, Tim Hopley, Muna Levan-Harris, and Jan Adamson. John Bradbury, Myles Dunnett, and Ornella Mbula also attend the meetings.

If you have any questions, please do get in touch.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J. P. Ballou" with a small "2" written below it.

John Bradbury, General Secretary

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Faber".

Steve Faber, Steering Group Convenor

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Myles Dunnett".

Myles Dunnett, Programme Manager

FAQs from 16 May

Q: Will a merger of the governance function for Church Life Fund and Inter-Synod Resource Sharing be brought before Assembly?

The Church Life Fund proposal referred this question for further consultation on 16 May. At the 16 May consultation, there was a general sense that merging the governance of the Church Life Fund and ISRS might be useful and bring benefits. However, there was uncertainty about how this would work in practice given the different purposes (collecting vs spending). It may be that this question can be resolved by better thinking through the procedure for the Church Life Fund Committee (CLFC), but it is not proposed that this should be done in tandem with the establishment of the Church Life Fund. Indeed, the capacity of CLFC to undertake this dual governance function may be more apparent once it is operational. This question is therefore referred for future work. The current status of ISRS/RSTG should remain as-is.

Q: What will the fund be called?

The name Church Life Fund met with approval. It is suggested that this be formally adopted. The Church Life Fund's governance committee will be known as Church Life Fund Committee (CLFC).

Q: Will there be an avenue for contributions from local churches and external bodies?

Yes – this is a helpful suggestion and could only increase the overall size of the fund. There will be a need to ensure a predictable income stream, so the fund should not be dependent on non-synod contributions, but it is nevertheless agreed that an avenue for these contributions should be created.

Q: Will CLR representatives circulate standard/draft resolutions for synod meetings?

This has already been done – please see the letter to Synod Officers sent on 10 June.

Q: Will the fund still be viable if one or two synods do not contribute?

In the event that one synod feels they are unable to contribute, it will very likely still be possible to establish and operate the Church Life Fund. The full scale of the impact if more than one synod decides they cannot contribute would depend on a number of factors, and any answer at this point would be highly speculative. It is clear however that a smaller fund would significantly restrict the work that can be funded, and our hope is that generous contributions will allow the CLFC to maximise impact.

Q: How might we achieve transparency between synods on their offers?

The Steering Group suggest that offered contributions are met with a spirit of genuine and public acknowledgment and gratitude, primarily at General Assembly in November. There will be no criticism of any synod who feel they cannot contribute.

Q: When will shared services and resources hub be available/come onstream?

An intensive period of implementation work will follow General Assembly in November. Shared services and the resources hub will be established throughout 2026, with a view to have them up and running as soon as possible. Timelines will be worked up and communicated after Assembly in November.

Q: What about things synods are already doing – is this intended to replace synod funding?

The prevailing mood on 16 May was that a hybrid, blended, both/and approach will be necessary. Where a synod is able and wishes to continue to support existing work, that would reduce calls on the Church Life Fund and enable more work overall to be supported.

Q: Are the Steering Group encouraging the sale of buildings?

Absolutely not as a policy. It is up to synods/trusts to manage their own capital assets, cash flow, etc. The source of contributions to the Church Life Fund is a matter for each individual synod and its trust(s).

Q: How will work be evaluated?

Success measurement will look different for different aspects of the Church Life Fund's portfolio. For the Resources Hub, it will look like common measures for technical platforms, based on detailed usage statistics and qualitative feedback. Other services will have different success metrics. The new communities proposal includes a mechanism for review of the new communities. The lay worker roles will be evaluated according to their individual objectives. A key principle for the CLF is that **all** funded work will be evaluated.

Q: Will ecumenical new communities be eligible for funding?

Yes – this has been incorporated into the new communities proposal. *Please note that these FAQs are not intended to provide comprehensive information on all four of the CLR Phase Two workstreams (financial resource sharing, employment of lay workers, provision of shared support services, and new communities of discipleship and worship). They do however address relevant questions related to the other workstreams if they were raised on 16 May. The Church Life Fund proposal brought before Assembly in November will form part of a portfolio of papers and Resolutions, addressing all four of the CLR Phase Two workstreams.

Q: How will calls on synod finances be synchronised (M&M, CLF, Legacies, ISRS)?

It is suggested that M&M should remain the first call on a synod's finances (as it is for a local church). The Steering Group acknowledge that a wider conversation about M&M needs to take place after General Assembly in November.

Q: Concern was expressed that current trustees may be asked to make a commitment for up to 10 years into the future, beyond their period of service. Should we propose to establish an average term for trust company trustees?

The Steering Group note that General Assembly has no authority to do this and, therefore, take no position. However, it has been noted that it is the trustee body being asked to make the commitment, not individual trustees. Additionally, the proposal is that the Church Life Fund will be reviewed periodically, so we are looking for an in-principle commitment, subject to review after an initial three year period.

Q: Will there be a backstop to the fund?

No – the closure option is to scale down and stop funding as commitments expire.

Q: Will there be a cap on administrative costs?

To avoid constraining the CLFC, an arbitrary formal cap is not suggested at this point. It will be a responsibility of the committee to ensure admin costs are proportionate to overall spend. Once the fund is operational, CLFC may wish to impose their own cap.

Q: Will an initial review of the fund be undertaken after 3 or 5 years?

It is suggested that this takes place after 3 years of operation.

Q: What is X Synod expected to contribute?

A number of synods have asked what their 'expected' contribution might be. The Finance Working Group and Steering Group deliberately take no view on this. In line with the URC's polity, it is the responsibility of each individual synod, along with its associated trust(s), to decide the level of its contribution. To aid discussions, the Steering Group wishes to remind synods and trusts of the figures laid out in the financial model. At the 16 May consultation, it was broadly acknowledged that the lowest level of funding, equating to £1mn per annum, would be too small to make a meaningful difference, allowing for little other than shared services. The median level fund, which is increasingly viewed as the baseline funding level for meaningful outcomes, is £2.5mn per annum. It has also been acknowledged repeatedly that the larger the fund, the more will be possible; this is particularly true in terms of lay worker and new communities funding, which will operate through grant-making. The higher funding level of up to £4mn per annum remains an aspiration. The model contained *suggested* figures for what synods/trusts of different capacities may wish to

contribute. The Steering Group feel strongly that it would be inappropriate to arbitrarily sort synods/trusts into categories based on a partial understanding of their financial position. Therefore, the Steering Group strongly encourage synods and trusts to make as generous an offer as they feel possible, given their financial position and other commitments.

The Steering Group are willing to engage with individual synods and trusts if they would find further conversation beneficial.

[This letter has been edited to remove a governance model and legal opinion which are out of date.]

Appendix Three: Draft Terms of Reference for the Church Life Fund Committee

Draft Terms of Reference

Committee	Church Life Fund Committee (CLFC)
Convenor	The Convenor will be recommended by Nominations Committee and appointed by General Assembly
Secretary	Successor role to CLR Programme Manager
Ex Officio Members	Two representatives from URC Trust (See 'Membership' section below)
General Assembly Appointed Members	One nominated representative from each synod, appointed by General Assembly (See 'Membership' section below)
Length of Term	Three years
In Attendance when required (to cover their areas of expertise)	Members of the Senior Leadership Team Offices of General Assembly Staff (e.g. Chief Finance Officer, Communications) Other URCT trustees, as required Any others as requested by the Committee
Minute Secretary	Successor role to the CLR Administrator
Meeting Frequency	Quarterly
Subgroups/Sub committees	Accreditation Sub-Committee will review new community applications and progress Possible lay worker application sub-committee Other sub-committees at the Committee's discretion, based on operational requirements
Quoracy	There will be no requirement for in-meeting quoracy, to avoid this becoming an obstacle. However, there will be a requirement for quoracy in ratifying decisions: at least 50% of synods (7) and one URCT trustee. If there are not enough members in a meeting to ratify a decision, this may be done by email.
Accountability & Reporting Duties	Accountability to General Assembly The Committee will be directly accountable to General Assembly, and must submit an annual progress report. Business Committee will initiate and coordinate a major review of the fund after three years of operation. This must include at least one non-URC reviewer. Reporting to URCT

	The Committee will need to submit its advice on the application of the Church Life Fund to URCT after every meeting.
Terms of Reference Review	Annually

Responsibilities

The Church Life Fund Committee (the Committee) has delegated authority from General Assembly to advise URC Trust (URCT) on the application of the Church Life Fund (CLF), mirroring the role of Resources Committee in relation to the Ministry and Mission Fund.

In exercising this authority, the Committee shall:

Shared services

- Oversee allocation of CLF resources to support new shared services, including accounting support, denominational procurement, HR, IT, payroll, property, and the denominational resources hub and helpdesk.
- Ensure shared services are delivered consistently and effectively, acting on the outcome of Resources Committee reviews.
- Monitor usage of the myURC resources hub and identify usage trends.
- Advise URCT on where to direct CLF funds for shared services.
- Ensure that the cost of shared services is proportional given the overall income to the CLF, and in light of the number of applications for lay worker and new community funding.

Lay worker grants

- Consider applications from synods for lay worker grants, ensuring eligibility criteria are met.
- Advise URCT on where to direct CLF funds for lay worker grants.
- Safeguard the distinction between lay work and ordained/commissioned ministry, in concert with the Deputy General Secretary (Ministries) and potentially a sub-committee.
- Ensure grant-funded roles meet requirements of legal compliance, safer recruitment, insurance, line management, and pastoral care.
- Monitor outcomes through proportionate reporting and evaluation mechanisms.

New communities grants

- Consider applications for new communities of discipleship and worship, taking advice from the Accreditation Sub-Committee on the suitability of applications.
- Advise URCT on where to direct CLF funds for new community grants.
- Ensure that new communities funded reflect agreed values and principles.
- Oversee the review process, taking advice from Accreditation Sub-Committee.

Fund stewardship

- Ensure that CLF expenditure aligns with Assembly resolutions.
- Ensure funds contributed by synods are applied only for CLF purposes.
- Liaise with synods in the case that applications are not proceedable, trying to find mutually agreeable solutions.
- Act with discretion, seeking to advance innovative and permissive projects which fall within the remit of the Church Life Fund.
- Review the CLF's income and advise synods on the level of contributions needed after the initial three-year term, if the fund continues.
- Explore and enable contributions to the CLF from local churches.
- Explore opportunities for collaboration outside the URC, particularly avenues for funding from external bodies.

Applications: communications and support

- Devise, implement, and oversee a service which seeks to support local churches and synods with applications and identifying opportunities.
- Oversee a communications strategy which aims to raise awareness of the fund and its opportunities.
- Actively advocate for the fund with each synod and across the denomination.

The intention of this remit is to give the Committee broad discretion in identifying which application of the funds available to them will have the greatest impact.

Membership and Appointment Process

Synod representatives

The Committee shall consist of one representative from every synod. Given the complexity of the Committee's remit, there needs to be a wide diversity of skills and experience within the membership. Synods will notify Nominations Committee of their intended representative; Nominations will then review the proposed synod representatives. If the proposed representatives do not cover the necessary range of skills and experience, as well as equality, diversity, and inclusion requirements, Nominations will invite synods to propose alternative representatives with specified skills. Nominations Committee will present a final list of members to General Assembly, which will be invited to appoint the members of the Church Life Fund Committee.

Skills within the Committee should include accountancy, grant-making, charity law, service provision (e.g. HR, IT, etc), mission work, community development, URC history and ethos, Reformed theology, and safeguarding. This diversity of skills reflects the breadth of the Committee's responsibilities.

To assist Nominations Committee in making their determination, synods will need to provide a mini-CV for their prospective representative. This will help Nominations appraise the overall spread of the proposed membership. Ensuring the right diversity of skills, experience, and EDI on the Committee is likely to be a challenge, requiring close collaboration between Nominations Committee and synods.

Convenor

The Convenor will be an additional member of the Committee, rather one of the synod representatives. The Convenor will be recommended by Nominations Committee and appointed by General Assembly.

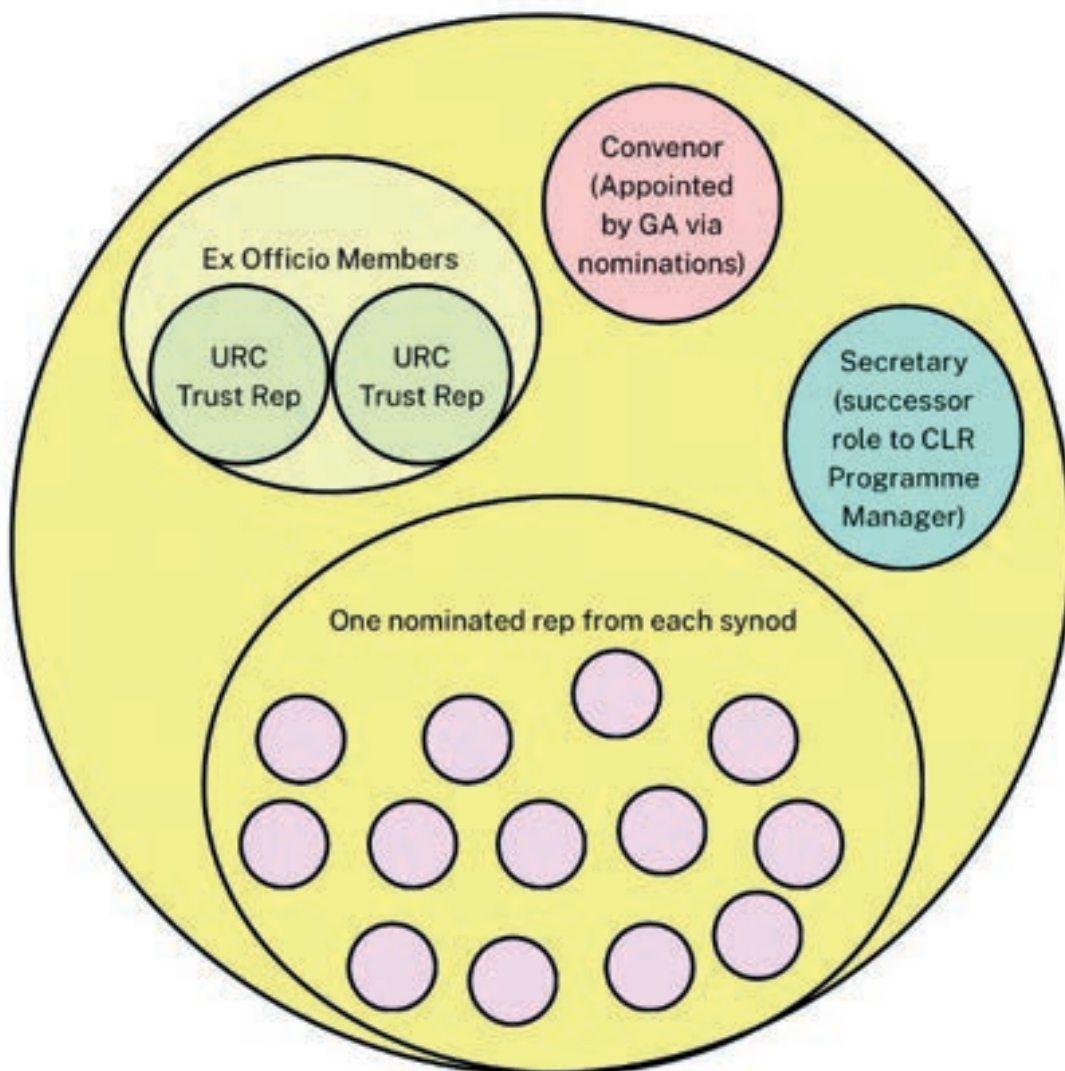
URCT members

To ensure URCT have confidence in the advice they receive from the Committee, two URCT trustees will also sit on the Committee in an ex officio capacity. These members will be appointed by URCT.

Other routine attendees

It is expected that ex officio members will routinely be in attendance, including the General Secretary and the successor role to the Church Life Review Programme Manager.

All members will need to undergo the URC’s safer recruitment process.



By Alex Clare-Young

Relationships with Other Committees

URC Trust

The Committee will provide advice to URCT on the application of the Church Life Fund under delegated authority.

Resources Committee

Close liaison will be maintained where CLF funds shared services, which will fall within Resources Committees' operational remit.

Business Committee

Business Committee will initiate and coordinate the three-year review of the CLF. The Committee must also liaise with Business Committee over the submission of its annual report to General Assembly, as well as any other General Assembly Resolutions which pertain to the Church Life Fund.

Nominations Committee

Appointment of members will be handled via the agreed nominations process, ensuring balance of skills and experience within the Committee.

Conducting Business

Additional meetings can be scheduled, with reasonable notice, if business requires it. Decisions may be taken via email with the same rules of quoracy applying. Such decisions will be recorded by the Convenor/Secretary and noted at the next meeting with updates on progress as needed.

Expertise from outside the Committees membership can be utilised for projects and instruct task groups from beyond its membership to develop specific pieces of work. The Committee has the power to seek external professional advice if they deem it necessary with reference to the Chief Operating Officer for unbudgeted professional fees.

The Committee has discretion to seek input from the wider staff team as deemed necessary.

Risk Management

The Committee will review the Risk Register as it relates to its key responsibilities, at least once per year, but will add additional risks as and when they arise.

Data Protection

The Committee will comply with data protection regulations (GDPR) and uphold URC guidelines and best practice with regards to data processing.

Appendix Four – Phasing of Contributions vs Awards

- Prospective projects for CLF awards may not be ready to make applications to the CLFC until Q3 or Q4 2026 at the earliest
- Contributions from Synods / Synod Trust companies may well be budgeted for an initial three years (2026, 2027 and 2028)
 - Trusts will almost certainly prefer to stick with that rather than shift the funding back by a year
- This may well mean that the CLF has significant funds accumulating during 2026 and only starts seeing draw-down for grants during H1 2027
- The suggestion is that we should therefore move away from the messaging that the CLF is a fund of **£x million a year for an initial three years** and move the URC's thinking towards the idea that it is a fund of **3 times £x million (i.e. the total of the three years of contributions) over an initial period of three to four years**
- This decouples the incoming contributions from the anticipated grant spending and makes it explicitly a matter of policy to allow for some projects to be awarded grants (funded out of the initial 3 years' contributions) which run into year 4 (and possibly year 5) even before the Synods' contributions for those years have been agreed

Romilly Micklem
22 July 2025

Appendix Five – Legal Opinion from Mr Andrew Middleton

Considerations for the Church Life Fund.

Overview

This paper considers the structural options for the creation and management of the Church Life Fund (CLF) suggested within the paper ‘Proposal to Establish a Church Life Review Fund CLR Steering Group and Finance Working Group – January 2025’. The first (Option 1) is for synods to donate monies to the general charitable funds of the URC (the general funds charity) and for the Charity Trustee (URCT) to designate these to be applied for the purpose of the CLF. The second (Option 2) is for the application of the funds to be for a specific purpose and therefore their application is restricted to this purpose. Funds will be donated for the specific purposes of the CLF either to be held by the charity trustee URCT as a special trust – restricted fund – and applied for those purposes or (Option 3) held and applied for such purposes by a separate charitable body such as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation CIO.

A Charity Trustee must act in the best interest of the charity at all times and has responsibility for the management and control of the charity (S.177 Charities Act 2011). A charity trustee has the power to delegate certain matters to committees e.g. URCT to Business and Resources where specific expertise is required. Despite any such delegation general oversight remains with URCT as the charity trustee.

Charitable funds can only be applied by a charity trustee towards the advancement of the charity’s charitable objects.

Option 1.

The URC general funds charity and designation

1. The URC general funds are held and applied by URCT as the charity trustee of the general funds charity in accordance with the charitable objects of the fund. The charitable objects of the general funds charity are ‘To advance the Christian religion for the benefit of the public in accordance with the doctrines, principles and usages, and the Scheme of Union of the United Reformed Church.’ In the exercise of its discretion as charity trustee URCT takes account of but is not bound by resolutions of General Assembly and the Assembly Executive.
2. Funds donated to the URC general funds charity (e.g. M & M, legacies, synods and others) with no restriction on their application by the Charity Trustee will be added to the general funds charity and will be available to be applied for the advancement of its charitable objects.
3. The Charity Trustee has the discretion to set aside ‘designate’, a portion of the general funds to be applied for specific purposes it identifies as appropriate which accord with the charitable objects of the funds. Doing this ‘ring fences’ funds that have been designated and creates a designated fund.
4. Such a designation is not permanent and can be removed by the charity trustee as and when it is considered in the best interest of the charity to do so.

5. URCT as a corporate charity trustee can enter into contracts with third parties in its capacity as charity trustee for the provision of services being described as 'URCT acting as charity trustee of the general funds charity of the United Reformed church.'
6. Should the need for the CLF cease, subject to the discretion of the charity trustee the designation would be removed and the funds subsumed into the general funds of the URC The charity trustee may also take account of the wishes of the donors and distribute any surplus donated funds in accordance with those wishes.
7. To designate general funds by URCT makes use of existing structures to hold and manage the funds.
8. The CLF can be created at a time that suits the denomination and use existing infrastructure.
9. Designation permits flexibility. Funds can be used for other purposes as required e.g. if it is decided by GA that a portion of the CLF should be applied for a more restricted CLF purpose there can be an additional designation for that, or a portion can be released.
10. With designation also comes a lack of control by donors over the application of the funds donated with a reliance on the discretion of the charity trustee.

Options 2 & 3

Funds donated for a specific purpose with the application of those funds restricted to that purpose (a restricted fund)

1. If funds are to be donated in a consistent manner for a specific purpose that purpose needs to be clearly identifiable.
2. The purposes of the CLF fund (its charitable objects) therefore need to be clearly identifiable.
3. The purposes and application will be subject to the wider charitable objects of URC namely, 'To advance the Christian religion for the benefit of the public in accordance with the doctrines, principles and usages, and the Scheme of Union of the United Reformed Church.' The CLF fund will be charitable.
4. When donating, donor synods will specify that funds are donated for the specific and agreed purposes of the CLF. The stipulation restricts the application of the funds by the charity trustee to those purposes
5. Donors can also specify what should happen to the funds in the event that the CLF is discontinued.
6. Funds can be donated for restricted purposes in two ways:

Option 2

- i. Funds donated to URCT for the CLF purposes to be held by URCT as charity trustee, as a special trust fund, and applied and accounted for by URCT in accordance with the restricted purposes of the special trust fund.

- ii. As a special trust fund, provided the criteria for charity registration have been met an application to the Charity Commission may be necessary to link the special trust to URCT or;

Option 3

- i. Funds donated to a separately formed charity with the objects of the CLF, the funds being held and administered by its charity trustee (URCT) in accordance with its objects i.e. those of the CLF fund.
- ii. If the criteria for registration are satisfied registration with the Charity Commission will be necessary.

Summary

The main differences between the options are risk, flexibility and timing. In respect of risk this is something that each synod will have to determine.

Option 1 provides for funds to be donated to the URC general funds charity and applied by the charity trustee, URCT, in accordance with the charitable objects of the fund. Risk always has to be assessed in a balanced way within the context of any given situation and after considering all factors. A risk with option 1 is that circumstances may change and the designation could be removed by the charity trustee with the funds being applied for other general purposes if considered to be in the best interest of the charity.

Option 2 makes use of existing structures and relationships with donated funds being held by URCT as charity trustee in a special trust and applied in accordance with the objects/purposes of the fund. The charity trustee is not able to apply them for any other purpose.

Option 3 provides the same security to donors and beneficiaries by the creation of a separate independent charity with its own charity trustee, structure and constitution which will provide for dissolution.

30.9.25

Paper A3

Denominational shared resources hub

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Melanie Campbell, Consultant, Church Life Review melanie.campbell@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 12 General Assembly resolves that the URC shared resource hub will be known as <i>myURC</i> and instructs Resources Committee and relevant staff to implement the URC shared resource hub, as soon as feasible.</p> <p>Resolution 13 Assembly resolves to establish a myURC helpdesk to receive and respond to emails, chat, and phone calls from myURC users, and instructs Resources Committee to implement the helpdesk as soon as feasible.</p> <p>Resolution 14a Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to URCT in relation to providing funding out of the restricted Church Life Fund for the operation of the myURC shared resources hub and helpdesk.</p> <p>Resolution 14b Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to review the operation of myURC and the helpdesk annually.</p> <p>Resolution 14c Assembly instructs Resources Committee to ensure sufficient staffing for the myURC helpdesk at its inception, and to monitor and review staffing levels to ensure effective staffing levels are maintained.</p> <p>Resolution 15 Assembly affirms the proposed myURC hub and helpdesk, governance model, and apportions operational governance responsibility to Resources Committee, with PLATO to contribute on questions of content.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To summarise the status of the project to establish a denominational resources hub, outline the proposed governance, operating, and support model, and review next steps.
Main points	<p>Executive summary This paper introduces myURC, a new denominational resources hub designed to give everyone in the URC simple, consistent access to the technical, legal, and procedural guidance/documentation they need. Developed through extensive consultation and learning from North Western Synod’s helpdesk pilot, myURC will host policies, templates, and advice on governance, safeguarding, property, HR, finance, and compliance, reducing duplication and easing administrative burdens. The hub is intended as a practical tool to make running churches easier, more efficient, and more consistent across the denomination.</p> <p>Alongside the hub, a helpdesk is proposed to support users by phone, email, and chat – triaging queries, guiding users to resources, and signposting where specialist advice is required. Governance will rest between Resources Committee (with PLATO providing content oversight) and ongoing funding oversight Church Life Fund Committee. Together, myURC and the helpdesk aim to create a modern, reliable support system that complements synod provision and strengthens denominational church life.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 50) (This work also follows on from the PLATO Handbook)
Consultation has taken place with...	CLR Steering Group and Sub-Committee Business Committee Resources Committee Officers of General Assembly staff (including Senior Leadership Team, Safeguarding Officer, Head of Compliance and Services) Synod Clerks November 2024 CLR Shared Services Consultation attendees (synod and trust officers, staff, and volunteers) Several focus groups drawn from across the denomination, including ordained/commission ministers, church secretaries, lay workers, and synod clerks)

Summary of impact

Financial	Costs for the development have been borne by the Church Life Review’s programme budget (the Annenberg Fund) within URC Trust. Ongoing operations will be funded through the Church Life Fund.
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External (eg ecumenical)	Local churches which are part of ecumenical arrangements will have access to the portal and helpdesk.
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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report provides a summary background to the development of the Shared Resource Hub to be known as myURC. It explains some of the learning from North Western Synod which informed the hub design and the concept of a helpdesk.
- 1.2. The report outlines the main features of the hub and how the testers' suggestions helped us amend our prototype. Recommendations are given for the ongoing oversight and governance for myURC.
- 1.3. The report suggests a helpdesk model to offer support to churches using a myURC contact number, email address, and chat facility.

2. Background

- 2.1. General Assembly set out Church Life Review Phase Two's portfolio of work in 2023, Resolutions 47-51a. Resolution 50 states:
General Assembly invites the General Secretariat and PLATO to re-establish the PLATO handbook (or equivalent), providing a central online resource of advice and proformas for trust, property, financial and related matters for local congregations, to be available online at the latest by General Assembly 2025.
- 2.2. These resolutions were motivated by a desire to support churches with the administrative, legal, and compliance tasks associated with managing their buildings, and supporting their volunteers and employees. A series of consultations and surveys, an exploration of 'customer journeys' through a 'living lab', technical development, testing, and working groups have jointly led to the version of a shared resource hub, myURC, which is now recommended to Assembly.

3. Exploration, suggestions, innovation

- 3.1. The CLR consultation in Yarnfield (2023) recommended exploring the possibility of establishing a form of shared resources for churches to easily access. The CLR Steering Group sought to understand more about the support churches were receiving and valued, or the support they couldn't get but needed. A survey followed which was sent to churches and synods in September 2024. The survey asked about resources available within the URC and elsewhere, and specifically, how the URC might better support local churches.
- 3.2. Both churches and synods identified the need for an online shared resource for all aspects of managing buildings, governance, running churches, and working with volunteers and paid staff.
- 3.3. A residential workshop in Milton Keynes (November 2024) agreed to pursue developing an online portal of resources for churches. The safeguarding pages on the URC website were suggested as a model to follow.

- 3.4. General Assembly has now made clear the denomination's commitment to improving the accessibility of resources and finding ways to make the experience of running a church much easier for local congregations. Providing a shared resource portal is one way of meeting this aim.
- 3.5. The subsequent development and design of the shared resource portal has been overseen by the CLR Steering Group.

4. Two journeys – same problem

- 4.1. In 2024, North Western Synod were exploring how they might provide consistent and readily available support to churches, with a specific emphasis on HR. They had the idea of a helpdesk of some nature.
- 4.2. Conversations between CLR and North Western Synod identified an opportunity to work together, to explore the concept of a helpdesk, intended to help understand how churches seek and obtain support, to inform the shared services workstream.
- 4.3. **Development and co-design:** In November 2024, North Western Synod established their helpdesk as a 'living lab'. This approach seeks to learn through co-production; in this way immediate practical issues can be resolved through learning and joint solution finding. It is important to note the North Western Synod helpdesk did not set out to provide all answers for developing a portal; it was a pragmatic and realistic approach to gaining some relevant and contextual learning in a short space of time about how queries are received and made, and what might improve the experience for churches and synod alike.
- 4.4. **Helpdesk (not helpline):** North Western Synod provided one free phone number for all queries. Staff mainline numbers were removed, individual mobile numbers were retained. New software was required to enable easy use. Calls were initially answered by the Deputy Clerk and Assistant who triaged or responded to queries. (Safeguarding queries were passed directly to the Safeguarding Officer, unless they related to booking on to safeguarding training events).
- 4.5. The source and nature of queries was recorded.
- 4.6. Shortly after introducing the free-phone number, a helpdesk email address was introduced.
- 4.7. Three months later an online events booking system was planned.

5. Experimenting and learning: learning points for hub design

Helpdesk calls were monitored from November to December 2024. In January 2025 the monitoring extended to include emails to the helpdesk address. The data collection was designed by the synod team and provided the following learning points:

- 5.1. **Content:** The highest volume of queries (in order) were administration processes, property, finance, safeguarding, trust, and legal.

- 5.2. **Calls vs emails:** During the monitoring period, North Western Synod received three times as many queries via the helpdesk email address than calls. There is a perception that many URC churches prefer to contact synods by telephone, yet the volume of telephone calls was less than imagined.
- 5.3. **Helpdesk email address:** The synod experience suggests a preference for churches to submit queries by email. Churches adapted well to the anonymity of the helpdesk address. The synod always responded quickly to these queries.
This indicates the potential for a wider application of the helpdesk email concept across the URC.
- 5.4. **Streamlining access:** The team recognised that the wide range of queries received by the helpdesk could be triaged. Over time the triage team found their knowledge base broadening, and noted that they could field more calls and emails, which in turn reduced calls to other team members.
Triaging calls and emails therefore holds potential for managing and streamlining activity in other URC settings.
- 5.5. **Event calendars:** The team were surprised to discover just how many queries related to booking events. They identified efficient ways for these processes to be automated, reducing staff workload and releasing capacity. The synod is now implementing an online event booking system.
Online calendars and event booking systems offer potential to streamline all such processes remotely across the URC.
- 5.6. **Logins and access:** The team noticed significant time was given to supporting people to login to systems requiring passwords e.g. church returns. They found that access to an online resource portal would need to be as simple as possible to reduce barriers to use, and avoid synods being inundated with login and password queries and ensure users are not deterred.
Logins create a barrier to usage; a resource portal will be most widely used if access is as simple as possible.
- 5.7. **Portal feedback and evaluation:** Church years are characterized by seasons and the administrative tasks related to them. For this reason, North Western Synod became very busy in the Spring, and this significantly impacted upon the data collected.
The learning point from this is that any feedback or evaluation mechanism must be as automated as possible, unless significant time and resources are to be dedicated to it.
- 5.8. **Further support:** Whilst the synod noted the wide use of email for queries, 25% of queries were received by phone. Customer service models indicate that self-service online resources are most successful when there is an option to gain further support from an advisor. Within the synod, the team were able to directly pass people on to specialists for advice and support.
This suggests that a resource portal might be helpfully supplemented by a staffed helpdesk: a friendly voice to help provide general advice, to assist with finding documents and other useful information, just as the synod helpdesk had done.

A helpdesk function might guide towards generic resources which may be used by URC churches, and signpost for further specialist support and encouragement.

- 5.9. These learning points from North Western Synod informed the portal design, and we are grateful to the team for their willingness to experiment, and their continued contributions.

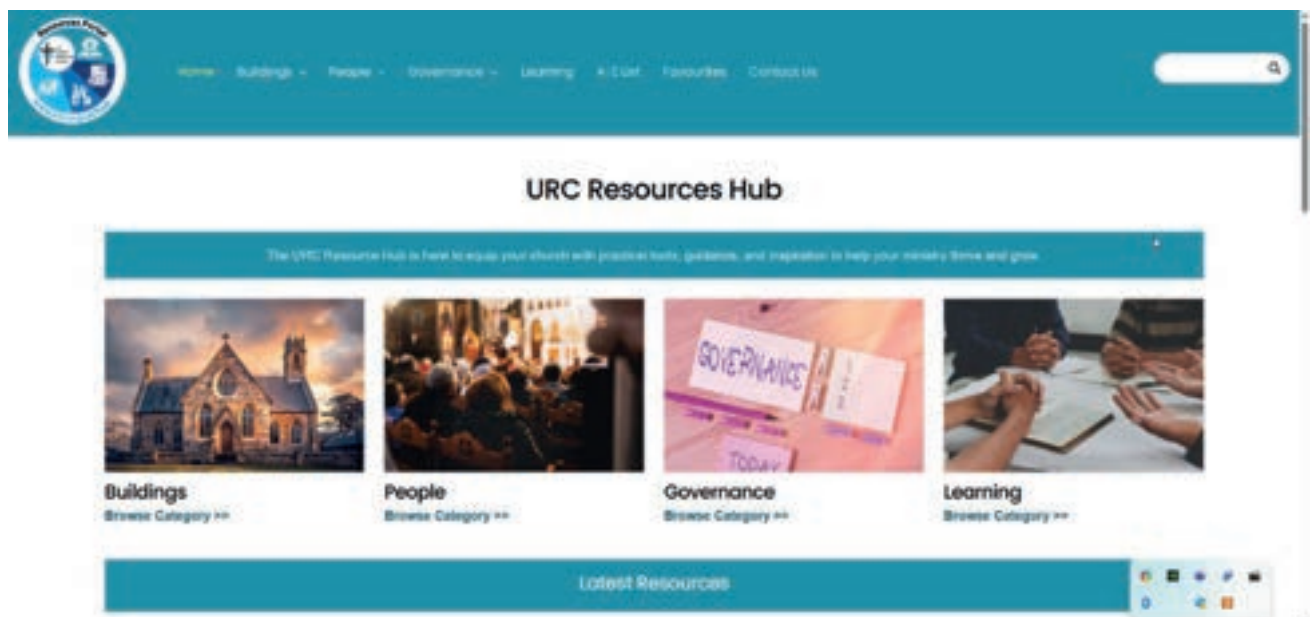
6. Resource hub: planning and prototype

- 6.1. **The brief:** Taking the brief from the Milton Keynes event, the portal would be recognisably a URC site. Its content would be the technical and detailed resources, guidance, information, and administrative forms necessary for running a church, including content from ministries and potentially also learning information (but not learning modules, i.e. SCORMs). The design principles identified at Milton Keynes informed the prototype and these were further refined by site testers.
- 6.2. The site would be available to all URC churches, LEPs, synods, and all else who engage with a URC community for whatever reason.
- 6.3. The portal prototype was initially designed in-house, before a web-designer developed the full site. In URC tradition, there were as many preferred ways of listing and organising resources as there were people! Even so, we reached a broad consensus on the current version.
- 6.4. **Prototype testing:** The prototype was tested in early June, and the subsequent site was tested by different groups at six-week intervals. We are grateful to everyone who participated and so willingly helped to improve the design. The site will continue to be tested as usage develops.
- 6.5. **What's in a name? From 'portal' to 'hub' to 'myURC':** The first prototype users asked for the portal to be renamed the Resource Hub. A few weeks later, myURC was suggested, and has become attached to the project.
- 6.6. **Emerging design features**
- 6.7. **Building community:** As the prototype was being tested, it was suggested that myURC could also be a resource which might develop a sense of community amongst users.
- 6.8. **Logins and security:** The prototype instigated questions about whether logins would be necessary, how would we extrapolate useful data without them, and whether logins could play a role in building a sense of belonging through the portal as well. It is fair to say there were voices speaking for and against logins; additionally, our learning from North Western Synod, and all our testing groups, advised that logins would be a barrier to usage, contrary to the aims of the shared resources. How might we balance these equally valid claims?

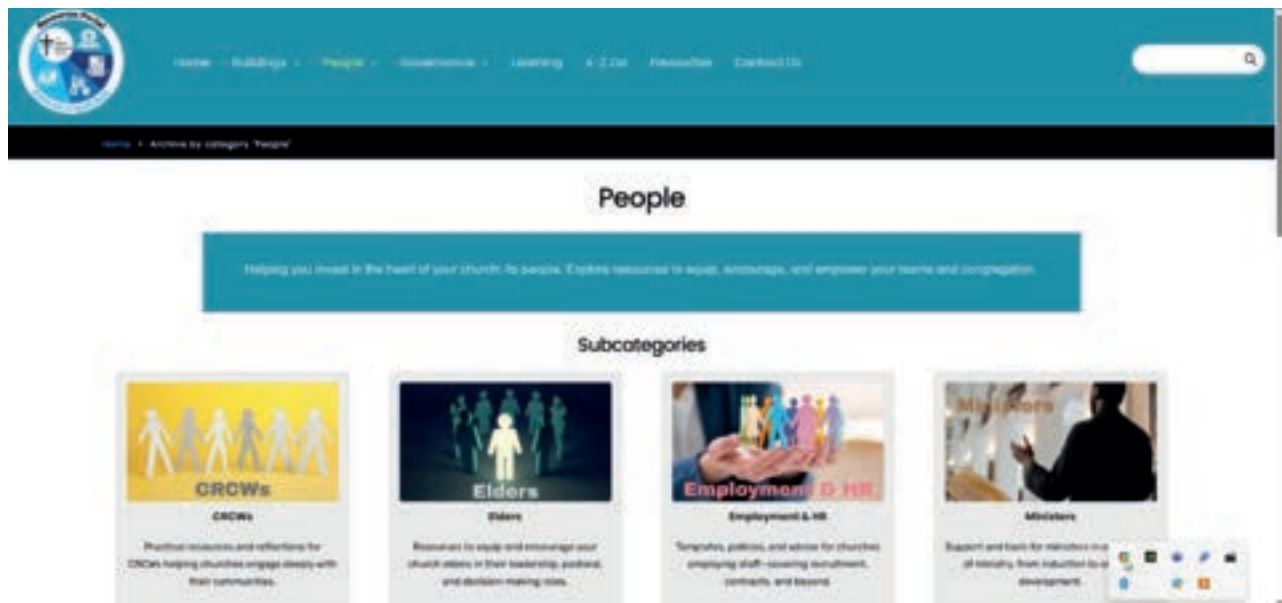
Listening to all voices, we have sought to find technical solutions to creating community whilst still obtaining useful data about hub usage and value, without the constraints of secure logins. At the time of writing these solutions are focusing upon integrating myURC news into stronger and consistent social

media and other communication campaigns; seamless logins may remain a longer-term development aspiration once the hub is widely used.

- 6.9. **Chatbots:** The success of the North Western Synod helpdesk affirmed the value of digital processes for seeking information. During the prototype testing, users asked for a hub chatbot to help find resources and respond to simple queries; this will be added once the site has gone live.
- 6.10. **Search and ‘you may also like...’:** Our testing groups helped immensely with improving the search function. This is now a predictive function with a ‘you may also like’ box of similar resources appearing, depending upon the page used.
- 6.11. **Calendar:** The site includes a calendar for key events, to be developed over time.
- 6.12. **Feedback/evaluation:** There will be a feedback box for users to report errors such as missing or broken links, or any other site issue. We would actively encourage such help from our users, as well as some positive comments too!
- 6.13. The site will use Google Analytics to monitor usage and identify which resources are most readily used. A chatbox will ask users if they have found the information they were looking for, and again at the point of download.
- 6.14. At regular intervals, pop-ups will be used to ask qualitative questions connected to success criteria. This approach utilises the site to generate as much information as possible, minimising the cost of other research and analysis.



Overview of draft myURC landing page (branding not updated to reflect name change), with main categories including Buildings, People, Governance, and Learning.



Overview of draft myURC people page.

7. Links and hyperlinks

- 7.1. **URC/myURC:** There will be both visible and behind-the-scenes links between the portal and the main URC site, so that users can be redirected. We aim to keep the number of clicks to a minimum.
- 7.2. **Synod links:** Synods are invited to link their websites to myURC as appropriate. It is not advised for synods to download myURC resources and post them directly to their sites, since this may risk resources remaining on synod sites beyond their expiry dates (i.e. when new versions have been uploaded to the hub).
- 7.3. **Hyperlinks:** We recognise that many URC resources contain links to other relevant documents. Where hyperlinks are used, there will be a technical fix to ensure users are carried to myURC although this may require multiple clicks. In time, as resources are checked, hyperlinks will be amended.
- 7.4. **External links:** Links to frequently used sites will be provided, e.g. Charity Commission, ACAT, ACAS, HMRC, HSE, and more. These will be added to the relevant hub pages, e.g. ACAT links will be found with finance resources, ACAS links will be found on the relevant 'people' pages.

8. Content: easier to find and locate

- 8.1. It is a principle that hub content will be checked by relevant legal and content specialists to ensure that the best advice and information is shared.
- 8.2. **Differentiating between myURC and URC website:** The main website will remain the outward face of the denomination, with missional and attractive information to inspire, guide, and assist people with mission, faith, and caring for their communities. myURC will be the place for all technical and procedural information a church may need.

9. Schedule of content for upload to myURC

- 9.1. Phase one will see all readily transferrable resources transferred from the main URC site to myURC. These resources will be known to be compliant and up to date. This includes some finance, legal, compliance, and administrative forms, URC governance information, the full suite of communication resources, and ministries resources.
- 9.2. Safeguarding pages will be transferred when all resources have been fully tested. Their format will remain similar to their current version. The URC website homepage will link directly to the myURC home page for safeguarding resources, so that they are prominent, highly visible and easily found.
- 9.3. Over time, the content will start to include those items which will take longer to agree such as property templates and policies. Please note that the table below is not meant to imply an order of *importance*, just the order in which content will be uploaded (due to increasing complexity).

Table 1: myURC schedule of module development

No.	Item	Resource	Comment
1.	Readily transferrable material from main site	The Manual GA policies Ministries Communications resources Administrative forms	All content which is known to be compliant and up to date.
2.	Safeguarding resources	Safeguarding	When all hyperlink testing is completed. There will be prominent links on both sites.
3.	GDPR resources	Policy, processes, including SAR <i>External links including Information Commissioner's Office</i>	New resources legally checked and applicable for churches, synods and Offices of General Assembly.
4.	Advisory content	Net Zero advice* Other advisory and helpful information as sourced from Church House or contributed by synods. *recognising some NZ materials may be applicable to main website	Advisory content when confirmed legally compliant and up to date.
5.	Health and Safety	Advisory information, processes, policies	Developing new information is underway. The resources will be relevant to church settings.

			The survey suggested Health and Safety as a priority area.
6.	HR	Advisory information, processes, policies, standard templates, documentation ACAS links to be added	The new Worker's Rights Bill will be a priority. A significant amount of material exists across the URC.
7.	Finance	Advisory information, processes, policies. ACAT, Charity Commission links to be added	
8.	Property	Advisory information, processes, policies	

- 9.4. GDPR and SAR resources have recently been developed for churches, synods and the Offices of General Assembly. Approved by a legal specialist, they will be uploaded to myURC by November 2025.
- 9.5. Essentially, the uploading of useful advisory content will be an ongoing feature of the hub's life. Materials known to be up-to-date, helpful and which are non-contentious in nature, will be added continuously and as they become available.
- 9.6. Health and Safety resources are the next to be developed, since church survey returns consistently asked for these.
- 9.7. HR resources will be pursued from November onwards.
- 9.8. Property and finance resources will be the last to be developed, simply because synod and trust practices vary most widely in this area. This excludes advisory and good practice information, which will be uploaded as it becomes available.
- 10. Interface with synods**
- 10.1. A key learning point from the Milton Keynes consultation and the survey returns, is that synods differ widely in how they provide support to their churches. Some specialise in areas which others may not. Some provide a broad range of support, whilst others may signpost to the URC main site. Subsequently, the experience of synod support to churches cannot be generalised.
- 10.2. For this reason, the focus for myURC is to provide consistent information and resources for all churches, in as many subject areas as possible. This recognises that some churches cannot access the services or support available to those in other synods.

- 10.3. The Milton Keynes and Yarnfield consultations cited the waste of developing resources 13 times in each synod, and myURC is intended to be the vehicle for beginning to address this.
- 10.4. The development of myURC invites collaboration and partnership in developing new resources, for the Offices of General Assembly and synods alike. Opportunities can be created to ask one another about plans for writing new support materials and documents, creating openings to work together where possible.
- 10.5. Of course, there will remain the need for synod/trust specific documents. However, in time, myURC will be a repository of information that will be helpful to frontline users in churches, and synod teams too.
- 10.6. Synod presence in the oversight of myURC and owning the content and its development will be key to myURC becoming a shared and valued resource.

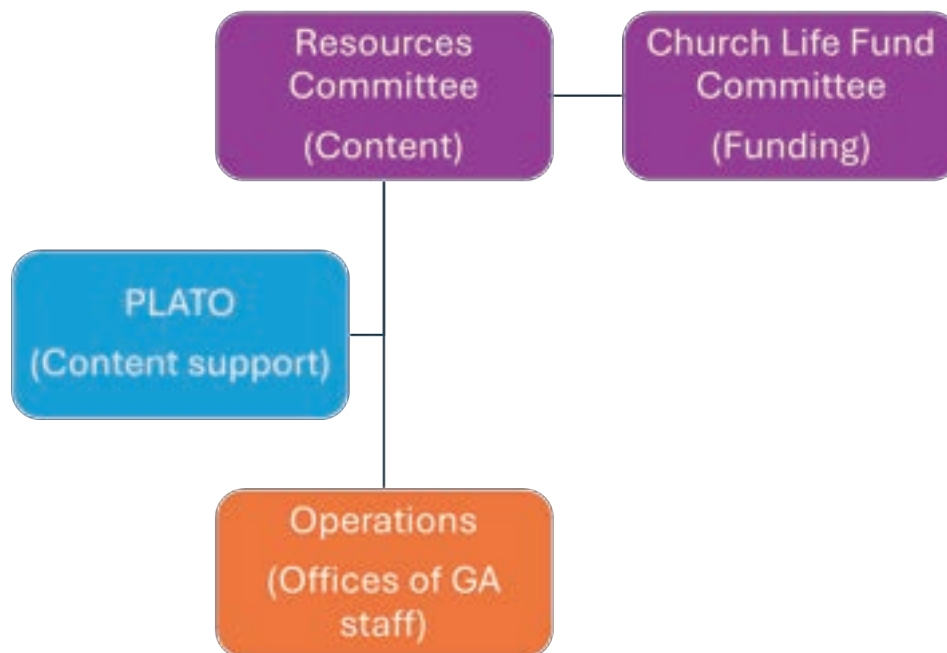
11. myURC Governance

- 11.1. It is proposed that the Resources Committee will hold overall governance responsibility for all content and operational aspects of myURC. This responsibility will be undertaken alongside Church Life Fund Committee for funding oversight, connected to overall success measurement. Resources Committee will work in conjunction with PLATO for content accuracy purposes. To enable this, an updated membership list for PLATO has been prepared. Governance functions will include:
 - 11.2. Editorial oversight of new content, its appropriateness, and that all legal checks have been made.
 - 11.3. Ensuring existing content is up to date; version controls are in place and effective.
 - 11.4. Ensuring suitable legal disclaimers, cookie policies, GDPR and other compliance requirements are adhered to properly.
 - 11.5. Ensuring operating policies and procedures are in place to guide the operational activity of myURC.
 - 11.6. Identifying, managing, and mitigating any risks relating to myURC.
 - 11.7. Considering and ensuring that any ethical issues relating to myURC are addressed.
 - 11.8. Ensuring the suitable delegation of authority and control to operational staff responsible for the day-to-day running of the site. This will be important to ensure staff can act upon feedback, and ensure the site is responsive to requests and suggestions.
 - 11.9. Ensuring an effective evaluation process.

12. Operational oversight

- 12.1. The management and oversight of the myURC site will be undertaken by Offices of General Assembly staff with responsibility for technical web support, and URC denominational information resources. This is principally to ensure alignment and technical coordination with the existing URC website and offers Senior Leadership Team (SLT) oversight of myURC and denominational, ministries, and compliance information.

- 12.2. It is recognised that the link with synods is crucial. The governance model engages synods through Property, Legal, and Trust Officers (PLATO), and equally requires similar engagement with synods.
- 12.3. A mechanism is required to coordinate and align the technical, content, and funding arms of myURC operation, and to resolve any shared issues and interdependencies.
- 12.4. It is suggested that Offices of General Assembly departments and synods nominate a team member to be their myURC champion. The myURC champions would contribute to operational coordination groups, become familiar with myURC and the content being developed and become the link between departments, synods and the myURC gathered resources.
- 12.5. Regular feedback between the coordination groups and governance committees would offer an opportunity to consider quality assurance, developments, and improvements.
- 12.6. The governance arrangements and their connections with operational performance will be reviewed to ensure they are suitable.



myURC governance and operations model

13. myURC Risks

- 13.1. **Legal risks:** Providing freely accessible information will bring risks. However, these risks are already present in the content of the current URC site and many synod sites. Legal disclaimers will be prepared.
- 13.2. **Operating risks:** A suite of policies and processes will be prepared to outline the operating parameters for myURC. Risk management for the site will be included within the Church House risk management processes.

- 13.3. **Reputational risk:** myURC and any associated helpdesk will provide resources only, and users will be signposted to synods for any further advice; this limits the risk of incorrect information being given to churches.
- 13.4. **Safeguarding risk:** Safeguarding resources will be uploaded and made available as directed by the denomination's safeguarding lead.
- 13.5. **Managing expectations:** myURC cannot resolve the inequitable provision of specialist advice which synods may make available to churches experiencing complex situations. Addressing this concern comprehensively would require a regional or denominational approach to making such advice available to churches. This is integral to the shared services workstream as it seeks to provide professional advisors; for example, with HR support (see 'a myURC helpdesk' below).

14. myURC Costs

- 14.1. **Set up and implementation costs:** With much of the development led in-house, the direct web-development and project management costs are not expected to exceed £25k for 2025/6. This will be covered by the Church Life Review's existing programme budget, rather than the Church Life Fund.
- 14.2. **Running costs:** Running costs will cover myURC technical, content and governance functions, as follows:
- 14.3. **Technical costs:** These costs cover the technical support to manage and keep the site working well for front-end users. They include technical upgrades, alignment with the URC main site, managing content uploads and acting upon feedback relating to missing links, hyperlink issues, etc. These will be absorbed within Offices of General Assembly operations.
- 14.4. **Automated evaluation/feedback:** The site will generate data which will require analysis. Automated processes will be relied upon as much as possible, to reduce costs.
- 14.5. **Content costs:** Costs will be associated with the staff time to develop new resources. There remains the opportunity for synods to offer resources to myURC.
- Version controls would identify which resources would be due for review, and whether synods may have similar resources which can be uploaded. This would require dedicated time for development and coordination. At the time of writing, plans are being developed for such processes.
- 14.6. **Management and governance costs:** Meeting costs, together with staff time to carry out myURC governance tasks.
- 14.7. **Evaluation costs:** Evaluation and feedback is essential to ensure myURC fulfils its remit. North Western Synod demonstrated that the more automated the process, the lower the costs and time resources required. This creates a more sustainable outcome.

- 14.8. At the time of writing, potential automated feedback and evaluation processes are under development. The Resources Committee and CLFC may wish to consider other costs for ongoing evaluation over time.
- 14.9. **Legal costs:** Some hub content may need to be reviewed by legal experts to ensure it remains compliant. Care will need to be taken that these costs are kept reasonable, to avoid taking up too much of the available Church Life Fund resource.
- 15. A myURC Helpdesk**
- 15.1. Helpdesks are a recognised customer support model and often supplement online resources.
- 15.2. myURC as a standalone resource provides information 24/7. The basic model does not offer any interactive support. The variable provision of synod support to local churches, together with the North Western experience, suggests a helpdesk to respond to queries might be the only constant source of support for some churches during working hours.
- 15.3. General Assembly has sought to make it easier for local congregations to run their churches. Providing a shared resource hub is one way of meeting this aim; a helpdesk augments this ambition by providing a personal contact to assist, and contextualise the resources provided. Collectively the resource hub and helpdesk represent a comprehensive resource, with a friendly voice to help churches find the information they need.
- 16. Potential remit for a helpdesk**
- 16.1. The helpdesk would be available to all myURC users. The helpdesk would triage queries received by email, chat, and direct calls.
- 16.2. Queries from churches can be anticipated to be about:
- 16.3. **Using the site:** how to access and download information, which search terms might help find information, how to sign-up, etc.
- 16.4. **Information specific:** questions about the status of information, whether it applies to churches, etc.
- 16.5. **Situation specific:** presenting a particular situation and asking for advice about the type of resources which would be helpful.
- 16.6. **Other:** calls to myURC from external sources, contacting the denomination for whatever reason.

Example of different levels of possible support:

A church youth worker has made a complaint about the paid administrator who insists upon taking phone calls on loudspeaker. The church elder calls the myURC helpdesk to ask if there is a General Assembly complaints policy.

Using the site: The helpdesk advisor guides the caller to find the complaints policy. The caller asks if the policy applies to all churches and

has further questions about the process. The helpdesk advisor directs the caller to their synod for advice.

Information specific: the helpdesk advisor can also confirm the General Assembly policy does apply to URC churches. The caller has further questions, and the advisor signposts the caller to their synod for advice.

Situation specific: In response to the caller's questions, the helpdesk advisor recognises the situation requires HR support and guides the caller to the relevant pages. The 'you may also like' box suggests equalities materials may be helpful. The advisor explains these resources. The caller has further questions about their situation, and the advisor signposts them to their synod for specialist advice.

Situation specific with professional advice: As above, the helpdesk advisor signposts directly to a professional advisor who can help further.

17. Level of helpdesk provision possible

- 17.1. **Situation specific with access to professional advice:** This is the only model which fully supports churches whose synods are unable to provide the advice and help they may need for any situation. It requires a network of professional providers approved by trusts to which churches can be signposted. This relates directly to the shared services workstream.
- 17.2. For helpdesk advisors to provide **situation specific advice** requires them to hold a detailed knowledge of the policies and processes which may be relevant as well as an ability to interpret the situations users present.
- 17.3. Helpdesk advisors would require experience of general church and management situations as well as extensive knowledge of URC policies and procedures, and those of synods/trusts.
- 17.4. This model would require well-prepared training and support for the advisors, and the acceptance and agreement of the synod trusts in the advice and information provided.
- 17.5. This model still requires the user to contact their synod for advice about any local synod and trust direct intervention and support available. It potentially results in a variable outcome for the church
- 17.6. Giving **information specific** advice requires the understanding of whether a General Assembly policy or any policy might be applicable to a church or Synod over many subject areas. It might also include checking the status of information and whether external links might be helpful. This level of advice also potentially touches upon some synod and trust requirements which may be relevant to the church context. Since most policies and resources will explain their scope, and the option is really between synod or church, this could be feasible. Checking document status and version-control would be a quick process for an advisor who knows where to look for this information.

17.7. **Site specific advice:** This is the most clearly bounded option, limiting support to how to use the site, and where resources might be found.

18. Recommendations

18.1. It is accepted that the more skilled the helpdesk advisor, the better the frontline user's experience. There is also a direct correlation with the costs involved. Additionally, whilst it is possible for a helpdesk to signpost sources of professional and specialist advice to churches, the complexity of the URC's trusts and specific policy provisions across England, Scotland, and Wales, would render this a step too far at this time.

18.2. In the above scenario, three models result in the user accessing professional advice via their synod; the model which accesses professional advice offers a comprehensive level of professional support.

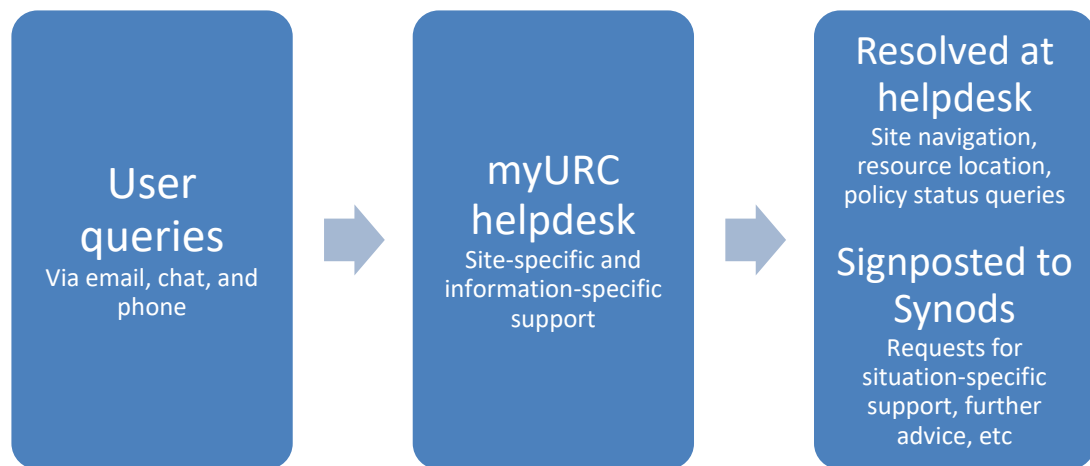
18.3. Developing a network of preferred providers of professional advisors would be feasible and suggested as the mid-term objective is to meet the aim for all churches to have access to effective support. This would be developed in tandem with the shared services workstream.

18.4. **Recommended helpdesk model:** For the reasons given above, it is recommended that a transitional approach is taken to develop a myURC helpdesk from **site specific support to information specific advice** within a suggested timeframe of 9 months (assuming governance and management arrangements are suitable for the transition to be made).

18.5. This model would help churches navigate the site and find resources. Queries about the scope of policies and procedures, their status and the nature of links provided would also be responded to. Requests for further support with individual situations would be redirected to synods. This can also include bookings for URC events.

18.6. This model provides interactive and email support to myURC users.

18.7. This first level of helpdesk service offers the option to learn from site monitoring data in conjunction with helpdesk usage before maturing to fuller provision in time and considering how the helpdesk can relate to accessing other shared resources.



Recommended helpdesk model, after scale-up.

19. Benefits

- 19.1. The helpdesk would support users with navigating and using myURC and its resources. Churches would find support with and by using myURC.
- 19.2. Limiting the helpdesk's purpose to site and information support is the simplest and easiest to implement, since other options require time-consuming involvement and engagement with synods and trusts.
- 19.3. myURC and the helpdesk would enable churches to find resources and interact in modern and efficient ways which are convenient for them.
- 19.4. A helpdesk augments the impact of myURC's support for local churches.
- 19.5. Since no professional advice or guidance will be offered by the helpdesk advisors the liabilities and risks are lower.
- 19.6. URC workloads peak at particular points of the year and support teams are typically small. myURC and the helpdesk have the potential to absorb some of the changing and seasonal demands from churches; for example, the myURC home page could display prominent information about church returns at the beginning of the year, and the helpdesk would be another source of support to churches with login queries and similar. Collectively the site and the helpdesk would be a resource which can complement synod teams during busy or lean times.

20. A helpdesk operating model

- 20.1. **Location:** Since myURC emails, calls, and chat messages can be received remotely, helpdesk advisors can be geographically located across the UK.
- 20.2. **Capacity:** North Western Synod volume email and call data cannot be readily extrapolated to a new national model. This is because the helpdesk impact on synod email and phone queries cannot be known for certain. It can be anticipated that some calls and emails would be resolved by the helpdesk as users gain confidence. An initial volume of 150 emails each month, and 40 calls might be realistic.

- 20.3. **Helpdesk advisor role:** It is suggested that one person be appointed as a helpdesk advisor, with backup from Offices of General Assembly or a synod to cover annual leave and other absences.
- 20.4. Since it is difficult to gauge the volume of calls and emails which will be received, it is recommended that the role includes content and technical functions required for myURC to operate, for a set period.
- 20.5. **Line management:** The helpdesk advisor could be managed from Church House. Whilst it is possible for the myURC site operation to be managed separately from the helpdesk, for example by a synod; the close interaction between the site and the helpdesk, would create additional coordination, governance and communication complexities. This is particularly the case if the helpdesk advisor undertakes content or technical tasks.
- 20.6. **Governance:** The governance mechanism for myURC should include oversight of the helpdesk function.

21. Conclusion

- 21.1. A helpdesk is necessary to provide full email and phone support for myURC.
- 21.2. A helpdesk advisor, managed from Church House, in conjunction with myURC is the quickest and simplest to implement. Planning for the model is underway, pending General Assembly approval.
- 21.3. The initial **site and information** level of support would minimise risk and restrict costs, and requires the least capacity to absorb change elsewhere.
- 21.4. This last factor is important, since there will be other process changes arising from the CLR, and limiting the operational changes arising from the helpdesk will assist other strategic changes for synods and the denomination alike.
- 21.5. The North Western Synod demonstrated that a generic level of helpdesk support with signposting to specialist advice might be an effective model for the URC. This would be the mid-term aim for myURC and the helpdesk.

Paper A4

An accounting support service for local churches

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)	<p>Resolution 16 Assembly instructs Resources and Church Life Fund Committees, along with relevant United Reformed Church (URC) staff, to establish an accounting support service, consisting of support for churches who can prepare their own accounts, and support for those who cannot.</p> <p>Resolution 17 Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to the URC Trust (URCT) in relation to providing funding out of the restricted Church Life Fund for an accounting support service.</p> <p>Resolution 18 Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to review the accounting service annually.</p> <p>Resolution 19 Assembly invites synods to apply to the Church Life Fund to request direct accounting support on behalf of select local churches, in cases where the church could not otherwise manage their accounts. To enable this, Assembly advises that synods maintain a list of those churches who struggle with their accounts, and refer those that require additional support after training and confidence building activities.</p> <p>Resolution 20a Assembly extends thanks to Small Charity Support for their willingness to support the denomination, and gratefully accepts the offer of support.</p> <p>Resolution 20b Assembly instructs Resources Committee to liaise with Small Charity Support, to find ways of working together to establish an accounting Adult Learning Model for the denomination.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To outline the need for accounting support, and propose a service model.
Main points	<p>Executive Summary Many local churches struggle to manage their accounts, often due to a shortage of treasurers and/or uncertainty about the requirements. This puts pressure on volunteers, creates compliance risk, and in some cases can threaten a church’s continuation. Current ad-hoc synod support is limited and unsustainable, making a structured, scalable solution essential.</p> <p>This paper proposes a two-tier accounting support service. Churches would be able to access tools, training, and confidence-building support (delivered with Small Charity Support Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)) to manage their own accounts. Where this is not sufficient, synods could apply for time-limited professional bookkeeping support on behalf of certain churches, funded through the Church Life Fund. This balanced approach builds local capability while safeguarding compliance and sustainability.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 49)
Consultation has taken place with...	CLR Steering Group and Sub-Committee Business Committee Resources Committee Various Synod Treasurers and finance staff Small Charity Support CIO

Summary of impact

Financial	Operation of this service will incur costs, which will be (part) funded through the Church Life Fund. There will also be a small level of cost related to expenses for Small Charity Support volunteers, who are offering their services on a pro bono basis.
External (eg ecumenical)	LEPs will be able to access the service. Small Charity Support, a CIO, are offering pro bono support, outlined in Appendix One.

1. The challenge of bookkeeping for local churches

- 1.1. It is widely known that local churches can sometimes struggle with bookkeeping. This is often linked to uncertainty about the requirements churches have to meet to comply with regulations. These challenges can sometimes place the Elders and others under considerable pressure.
- 1.2. Local churches are increasingly struggling to find treasurers, and when volunteers cannot be found, the risks to the local church can be existential. In some instances, the inability to keep accounts in order may be the deciding factor between continuation and closure. This situation is not sustainable.

- 1.3. Synods are increasingly being asked for support, highlighting the need for a denominational response. As the Church Life Review process has moved forward, accountancy has become one of the most frequently cited areas where support is needed at the local level.
- 1.4. Despite the challenge bookkeeping can present, the majority of local church accounts are not overly complex, tending to mostly be a case of tracking receipts and payments. Expert accountants may not be needed in every case, and there is the potential to help churches by giving them the tools and confidence to do their own accounts. In other cases, direct practical support will be required.

2. Current support

- 2.1. At least two synods are currently providing practical support to a handful of their local churches. In South Western Synod, for example, the Synod Treasurer is directly supporting around six local churches with their bookkeeping using Excel. This is done on a voluntary basis. Without this support, these churches would not be able to manage their accounts.
- 2.2. The challenge with this model is that it is not replicable in every synod – some Synod Treasurers and/or finance staff will not have the capacity to make this offer to their churches. Equally, even where synod officers and staff do have capacity, the offer is not scalable, and can only be successfully managed with a very small number of churches, i.e. those who are struggling most.
- 2.3. At the moment, demand is exceeding capacity. The key challenge is therefore to design a service which is scalable. The service must also be hybrid in its design, meeting the needs of churches who could do their own accounts if they had the right support, as well as those who need someone to take on the burden more directly. It is critical to note early on that, if a church outsources their bookkeeping to a high street accountant, the Elders are still ultimately responsible for their reporting – this responsibility cannot be transferred.

3. Proposed accounting support service

- 3.1. We propose to establish a two-tier accounting support service for local churches across the denomination:
 - The core provision will be structured support, so that churches can grow in confidence to manage their own accounts. Key to this is the belief that the majority of churches have the ability to handle their accounts, but lack the tools and training. The aim will be to increase the confidence of volunteers, provide suitable tools like simple spreadsheets, and train people in using them. In doing this, the URC will be supported by a CIO called Small Charity Support. The nature of this offer is detailed in Appendix One below.
 - In limited cases, if training support has failed, and if a synod believes direct access to accounting support would be of significant missional benefit to a church, synods will be able to apply for a local church to have support with bookkeeping. This will be coordinated through approved accountancy firms. Care will be taken to ensure that the

preferred accountancy firms have expertise in charity and church accounting.

- 3.2. In cases where churches are provided with access to hands-on bookkeeping support, this will be for a time-limited period. Funding from the Church Life Fund may cover up to 100% of the cost over the defined period, but this is not an automatic assumption; it may be that some churches could contribute by covering a portion of the cost depending on their ability. Over the funded period, synods should work closely with the local church, and report back to Church Life Fund Committee with outcomes regarding the success of the intervention.
- 3.3. In some cases, synods may not know whether individual churches struggle with their accounts. Likewise, churches may not inform synods that there is a problem. For this proposal to work, a greater degree of understanding between synods and local churches when there are challenges around accountancy is required. Some synods already maintain records of which churches are facing difficulties in areas like accounting; this practice would be of wider benefit. When requesting direct bookkeeping support for churches, synods should ensure that the church is generally viable, and that the support will be of wider missional benefit to the church.
- 3.4. All accounts must be prepared in accordance with charity law and the relevant accounting framework.

Appendix One: The offer from Small Charity Support (prepared by Dr Brian Seaton)

1. Small Charity Support (primarily Brian, along with other volunteers) has a decade of experience of supporting a diverse range of small charities (definition of "small charity" below) to overcome the inevitable difficulties in recording, managing and (particularly) reporting their financial activities in compliance with Charity Commission statutory guidance.
2. Small Charity Support has long argued that the widespread lack of financial confidence among charity trustees - and, hence, reliance on external sources of financial management "support" - is created primarily by the fact that Charity Financial Management Standards (based on the financial management procedures designed for the commercial sector) are Not Fit for Purpose. And Small Charity Support is not alone in that opinion (see the article "Not Fit for Purpose" on its website (<https://www.smallcharitysupport.uk/index.php/charity-thoughts>)).

Small Charity Support endorses Einstein's view that *"You can't solve problems by using the same thinking that created them"*.

3. Hence, over the last decade it has therefore developed a "proof of concept" spreadsheet which unequivocally demonstrates that traditional double-entry bookkeeping systems (although, in their time, excellent for "ink on paper" technology) are now obsolete and should be replaced by modern relational database technology which, instead, uses "tagging".

The spreadsheet has been used by a wide range of "small" charities. Such technology brings comprehensive financial recording, management and reporting within the capabilities of anyone familiar with basic spreadsheet and social media systems and requires minimal additional training. Unusually, if not uniquely, the spreadsheet can record, manage and report a charity's end-of-year Annual Accounts on both the Charity Commission's Accruals and Receipts & Payments bases (*ie*: compliant with guidance CC16 and CC17 respectively) simultaneously and "in real time".

Small Charity Support believes that such an approach does much to relieve the current reluctance of people to take on the role of Treasurer or Finance Manager (or even the role of Trustee) within their Church due to feeling (incorrectly) that it is beyond their capabilities.

4. Small Charity Support's approach is focused on developing self-sufficiency - *ie*: getting the Trustees/Treasurers/financial staff (if the charity has them) to a point where they are able confidently to perform all the necessary tasks themselves to the required standard. But recognising that further support will be necessary from time-to-time, eg: where the statutory requirements change, or the charity takes on new activities requiring unfamiliar financial procedures.

We shun the kind of "support" which is actually creating "dependency", *ie*: instead of developing self-sufficiency promotes the delegation of responsibility. That is particularly so where that "support"/"dependency" is based on financial professionals shrouding their "support" in legal/financial

jargon and procedures as a way of ensuring that the charity continues to be dependent on their "support" (and the income it generates for them).

Small Charity Support endorses the view of the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, 600-531BC - *"A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say 'we did it ourselves'"*.

5. Small Charity Support has learned that charity trustees (particularly the trustees of "small" charities) often think that the role of the Independent Examiner of charity accounts is to take the charity's financial records and "knock them into shape" so that they can be signed off as compliant with the statutory standards.

That is not the case. It is the Charity's Trustees collectively, and the Treasurer in particular, who are responsible for ensuring that their charity's Annual Financial Accounts are compliant with the statutory guidance. And the Independent Examiner's statutory report confirms that explicitly.

6. That being the case, if the Trustees generally and the Treasurer particularly, are capable of recognising whether or not their own Annual Financial Accounts are compliant with the statutory guidance it is reasonable to expect that they are capable of examining the Annual Financial Accounts of another charity to check whether those Accounts are (or are not) compliant with the statutory guidance.

Small Charity Support's view is that is a key justification for why charity Treasurers should be willing to act as the Independent Examiner for another charity's Annual Financial Accounts - particularly where the other charity is of a similar nature (eg: both are URC churches) - and even more so because acting in that way is widely recognised as a good and practical way of enhancing one's own knowledge and experience in the proper management and reporting of charity accounts.

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day - teach a man to fish and you feed him for life"

7. Brian Seaton, the Lead Trustee of Small Charity Support has relevant experience in the Adult Learning Model (ALM) for developing the knowledge and expertise of older people who have long-since passed the stage of conventional didactic - stand in front of a class and tell them what they need to know - teaching. The ALM recognises that older learners come with a wide range of existing knowledge and experience and will therefore find some elements of a didactic class boring or irrelevant, and other parts out of context.

So learning is based on problem-solving in small groups. Those who already have some awareness of the issues enhance their understanding and experience by having to articulate that to others in the group who are unfamiliar with it. And if the problems to be solved by the group are carefully designed to highlight key issues by initially withholding key relevant data or information, the group collectively learns to recognise and articulate both the need for those data/information and the importance of collecting them in an accurate and timely manner.

8. Small Charity Support would be interested in developing such ALM activities to promote both knowledge and cohesion in compliant financial management and reporting within URC Churches. In particular, facilitating Church Treasurers being empowered - and therefore, willing - to act as Independent Examiners for other Churches in the area (although avoiding, where possible, "tit-for-tat" arrangement whereby two Churches arrange to Independent Examination each other's account, thereby creating the risk accusations of inappropriate "Conflicts of Interest".)

Paper A5

Options for denominational buying support

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Myles Dunnett, Programme Manager, Church Life Review (CLR) Appendix One written by Tim Llewelyn, acting as CLR Procurement Consultant, as part of his role on Resources Committee
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 21 Assembly advises that the URC should actively incorporate more systematic procurement approaches and improved resources in the future.</p> <p>Resolution 22 Assembly instructs Resources Committee to undertake work to further investigate, cost, and propose a preferred procurement model to be adopted by the URC.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To consider the potential benefits of denominational buying support for the URC and propose next steps.
Main points	<p>Executive Summary There is a lack of structure in buying across the URC. This represents a missed opportunity, as the URC could benefit from more systematic procurement approaches and improved resources, especially in tackling its challenges and achieving its targets.</p> <p>Multiple buying support models are possible – Appendix One explores the possibilities. Resources Committee are tasked with costing and establishing an initial service.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 49)
Consultation has taken place with...	CLR Steering Group and Sub-Committee Business Committee Resources Committee Survey sent to Church Secretaries (117 responses)

Summary of impact

Financial	Potential cost savings for local churches, synods, and the Offices of General Assembly. Service cost to be agreed between Church Life Fund, Resources Committee, and synods.
External (eg ecumenical)	Potential environmental benefits and opportunities for collaboration with other denominations.

1. Current status of buying in the United Reformed Church

- 1.1. There is currently no group buying service in the URC. All buying is done locally and independently by churches, synods, and the Offices of General Assembly.
- 1.2. Buying is an area where many local churches are often in need of support. In a survey sent out to local churches with 117 responses, 37% of respondents suggested that they either need help now with an aspect of buying, or would be interested in help if it was available in the future. The need is not uniform: many churches are happy with their current buying arrangements and do not need additional support. In cases where churches are struggling with their buying, the most commonly identified areas are energy, phone and broadband, maintenance, and insurance.
- 1.3. The Steering Group decided that there was a need to better understand how a professional procurement approach could help the Church. Tim Llewelyn, a member of Resources Committee, generously offered to undertake a piece of consultancy work to aid Assembly's understanding of procurement opportunities, including the benefits, types of structure, resources, strategies, and potential models. This report can be found in Appendix One.
- 1.4. A group buying service would be of significant benefit to the Church, bringing cost savings, improved compliance, and better management of risk, among other benefits. A number of ecumenical partners have established procurement services, particularly the Church of England, who operate the Parish Buying Scheme.

An ecumenical version of this scheme is available to all churches, called the Church Buying Scheme, which is operated by 2buy2. The Steering Group have decided not to endorse this platform for use across the denomination at this time, but note that it is available should churches wish to use it.

2. Possible models

- 2.1. As noted in sections nine and ten of Appendix One, there are numerous ways to structure procurement. Procurement may be centralised, regional, or hybrid; service provision may be in-house (e.g. a staff member or team) or outsourced (e.g. a third-party service like the Church Buying Scheme).
- 2.2. A model for the URC would need to cater for the Offices of General Assembly, synods, and local churches, which all have different buying needs in different contexts. This means a simple 'centralised' service may not be the most beneficial solution.

3. Finding a procurement solution appropriate for the URC

- 3.1. A procurement function would be of significant benefit to the URC. The service must be proportionate to our scale, accessible to church members, and cost effective.
- 3.2. A potential 'best fit' model is explored at the end of Appendix One. This model would be a step-change in our buying culture, and represents a longer-term view of an ideal future, rather than a short or medium-term goal.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there is both need and good reason to establish a service for collective buying in the Church. Responsibility for the operation of this service would fall within the remit of Resources Committee; the Church Life Fund would be in a position to provide funding. The level of funding provided from the Church Life Fund would need to be considered once the shape of the service was decided.

- 3.3. The Steering Group recommends that Resources Committee undertake further work to establish a procurement service for the URC, focussed initially on energy savings for local churches, and potentially with access to expert in-house support.

Appendix One – Report on Buying in the URC by Tim Llewelyn

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The URC's Church Life Review ("CLR") has identified a potential opportunity to benefit the denomination through the provision of formalised buying support.
- 1.2. This paper sets out the buying challenges within the URC and presents Procurement approaches for consideration.

2. Buying in the URC

- 2.1. Effective: Goods and services get purchased from where they are needed.
- 2.2. Facility-heavy: Employee and Ministry & Mission ("M&M") costs aside, significant expenditure within the URC is on facilities (eg equipment, maintenance, and utilities).
- 2.3. Flexible: Limited structure to buying often means those with a demand have freedom of approach.
- 2.4. Inconsistent: No standardised approach or resources across the URC, even differing between Synods and between Local Churches, with no apparent centralised ownership.
- 2.5. Inefficient: Duplication of effort across the URC and missed opportunities to get best value-for-money solutions (eg due to a lack of coordination and collaboration).
- 2.6. Siloed: Goods and services can be purchased without prioritisation of the wider goals of the URC (eg a Local Church committing to a non-green electricity tariff due to a cheap deal and budget constraints but in conflict with net zero ambitions).
- 2.7. Supplier bias: Repetitive use of suppliers without regular benchmarking - of specification, deliverables, cost, etc - is not uncommon.
- 2.8. Tactical: Often short-term focussed (eg responding to immediate need and not looking far beyond the current budget year), without longer-term strategic orientation.
- 2.9. Under-resourced: Buying is frequently performed by people with limited - to no - specialised training, who are doing it in addition to their core role and with restricted time and capacity.
- 2.10. Vital: Without the relevant goods and services, the URC cannot successfully function.

3. Procurement

- 3.1. Is the means by which goods and services are bought for an organisation.
- 3.2. Is a strategic approach to buying, from one-time requirements to recurring needs.

- 3.3. Begins with the initial recognition of a need (the demand), specifies the requirement, evaluates - and decides on - the source(s) of supply, agrees the terms and conditions of purchase, and ends with the management and performance of delivery.
- 3.4. Aims to provide fit-for-purpose, value-for-money solutions that meet the needs of the organisation in a compliant manner.

4. Example Goods and Services

- 4.1. Audio Visual (“AV”) equipment: Screens, microphones, speakers, etc.
- 4.2. Communications: Internet services, phone contracts, etc.
- 4.3. Consumables: Cleaning and hygiene products, office supplies, etc.
- 4.4. Fixtures and fittings: Appliances, furniture, security systems, etc.
- 4.5. IT: Computers, printers, software licences, etc.
- 4.6. Printing services: Banners, leaflets, posters, signs, etc.
- 4.7. Training: Health and safety, fire, first aid, etc.
- 4.8. Utilities: Electricity, gas, and water.

5. Benefits of Procurement Good Practices

- 5.1. Cost savings: Through competitive tendering, economies of scale, and negotiation.
- 5.2. Compliance: Through formal tender documentation, legal contracts, and specialist knowledge (eg from trained workers: data protection, legal, procurement, etc.).
- 5.3. Risk mitigation: Through the evaluation of potential suppliers, written agreements (eg service levels and other terms and conditions), and supplier performance reviews.
- 5.4. Strategic and mission alignment: Through standardised documents (covering, for example, environmental and ethical requirements), cross-functional teamwork, and a wider view of requirements.
- 5.5. Supplier influence: Through greater leverage (due to larger volume of requirements), formal agreements, and the involvement of procurement experts.
- 5.6. Transparency: Through formal documentation, approval processes, and greater access to spend data.

6. Types of Procurement Structure

- 6.1. Centralised: A single responsible department that oversees and manages all buying requirements.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Wider, more strategic perspective.	Harder to incorporate all local requirements.
Easier to standardise approach.	Slower to respond to local demands.
Significant control of process.	Less flexible.
Removes duplication of effort.	Significant bureaucracy.
Larger cost savings more likely.	Challenging to implement.

- 6.2. De-centralised: Multiple departments manage their own buying requirements (e.g. each function / department).

Advantages	Disadvantages
Local requirements well-understood.	Narrower, less strategic perspective.
Faster to respond to local demands.	Many different approaches.
More flexible.	Less process control.
Limited bureaucracy.	Duplication of effort.
Simpler to implement.	Lower cost savings likely.

- 6.3. Hybrid: A combination of 6.1 and 6.2 (eg common requirements managed centrally, and location-specific requirements managed locally).

Advantages	Disadvantages
Strategic and operational balance.	A compromise.
Savings and requirements balance.	More complex.
Compliance and efficiency balance.	Can cause confusion.
Expertise and resilience balance.	
Adaptable to need.	

7. In-house vs Outsourced Procurement

- 7.1. In-house: Procurement requirements are managed by an organisation's own people (this may include external temporary labour, eg to support busy periods).
- 7.2. Outsourced: Procurement requirements are managed by a third-party service provider on behalf of an organisation, managed through a contract with agreed service levels (this may be located on- or off- site, or a combination of both).

7.3. Comparison:

In-house	Outsourced
Organisation focussed.	Profit orientated.
Non-core activity effort and resource.	Specialist operations.
Culturally aligned.	Integration of cultures.
Hands-on, direct control.	Hands-off, delegated responsibility.
Internal, retained expertise.	Access to more resources and wider expertise.
Direct supplier relationships.	Complex supplier relationships.
Quality assurance management.	Supplier performance management.
Good sensitive information protection.	Higher risk of data and confidentiality breaches.
Increased internal fixed costs.	Increased internal operational costs.
Longer-term benefits and value creation.	Immediate benefits and impact.

NOTE: In-house Procurement can be supplemented by some outsourced elements (eg using a Procurement consultancy company to run a high-value, complex tender where specialist knowledge is required and not available internally).

8. Standardised Procurement Resources

8.1. Overview: Having a ready-made and accessible resource ‘toolkit’ for repetitive tasks, such as Procurement activities, can either be the most basic form of formalised Procurement within an organisation or one of the critical components of fully formed Procurement functions.

8.2. Types of resource:

- 8.2.1. Governance documents – eg A Procurement policy template.
- 8.2.2. Project documents – eg Business case proposal and timeline templates.
- 8.2.3. Tender documents – eg Request For Information (“RFIs”), Request For Quotations (“RFQs”), and offer evaluation templates.
- 8.2.4. Agreement documents – eg Data processor and service contract templates.
- 8.2.5. Supplier performance – eg Monitoring tools and remedy / escalation guides.
- 8.2.6. Systems – eg Contract management and ordering.
- 8.2.7. Training – eg E-learning, face-to-face (in-person / online), and written guides.

8.3. Significant benefits:

- 8.3.1. Clarity of requirements and agreements – Should reduce the potential of misunderstandings with suppliers and help risk mitigation (eg could otherwise lead to disputes, incorrect delivery, non-compliance, and additional costs).

8.3.2. In-built expertise – Development of these resources by specialists (e.g. Legal and Procurement) should give confidence to those less experienced and skilled in procurement activities, which could be especially helpful at Local Church level.

8.3.3. *Time and effort savings* – Should reduce the duplication of effort, especially if well-tailored to need (eg low cost, low complexity requirements vs high cost, high complexity requirements).

8.4. Resource creation:

8.4.1. *In-house* – More viable and cost-effective if specialised Procurement function(s) exist but often consumes more time and takes resource from day-to-day tasks.

8.4.2. *Outsourced* – Best suited where specialised knowledge (eg legal) and speed of production is required, but it is usually more costly.

9. Procurement Strategies

9.1. Overview: There are many approaches to Procurement so to achieve the most beneficial outcomes, with the most appropriate solutions being determined by a variety of factors (eg requirement, circumstances, and organisational structure). A combination of these approaches is normally required.

9.2. Example approaches:

9.2.1. *“Make” or buy* – Appropriate use of third-party providers rather than internal resources to meet demands (eg use of an external specialist company to design and produce publicity material rather than an internal communications department due to capacity constraints).

9.2.2. *Competitive tenders* – A fundamental Procurement principle that helps an organisation to compare the offerings of different suppliers and to gauge if the pricing provides value-for-money prior to selecting a supplier.

9.2.3. *Bundling requirements* – More potential business through a supplier (eg combining all energy requirements) usually increases a supplier’s customer focus, improves a customer’s leverage, and results in better pricing offers.

9.2.4. *Commercial frameworks* – Price agreements with suppliers for defined goods / services, which may include fixed rates, discount scales (eg £X per unit for 0-50, £Y per unit for 51-100, £Z per unit for >100), and rebates.

9.2.5. *Multi-year agreements* – Longer-term agreements (eg 3-5 years) for ongoing / recurring requirements often lead to stronger supplier relationships and reduced costs (over-dependence and complacency can arise if too long).

9.2.6. *Purchasing platforms* – The potential to gain from leveraging the economies of scale and existing relationships of third-party service providers (eg via marketplaces), which can be especially beneficial as an interim solution when a new Procurement function is established within an organisation.

9.2.7. *External collaboration* – Looking beyond the boundaries of an organisation can provide additional opportunities (eg another organisation with similar requirements could share services), subject to relevant legislation and complexities.

10. How Procurement can help the URC

- 10.1. Good stewardship of funds: Purchasing principles and good practices focus on spending money appropriately and reducing unnecessary expenditure, which could be especially helpful with URC budget challenges and deficits.
- 10.2. Enabling Local Churches: By having readily available specialised Procurement resources and further support (eg a tender run by Church House on behalf of others), local URC churches can be better equipped to effectively and efficiently purchase requirements – it can even free up capacity that can be used for more pressing activities (such as mission and outreach).
- 10.3. Environmental sustainability: The economies of scale through bundling requirements could lead to more affordable sustainable solutions (eg green energy tariffs), supporting the URC's environmental ambitions and net zero targets.
- 10.4. Governance and compliance: Expert created resources and formalised knowledge sharing could improve the URC's awareness of the seemingly ever-growing regulatory and legal requirements (eg contract law, data privacy, health and safety, and modern slavery), which should help mitigate risks across all parts of the URC.

11. Other Factors

- 11.1. Budget ownership: The money for goods and services is held within each organisation, using their own processes and systems from which they may not wish to part. It also means payments must be managed by each organisation, even if a denominational pricing agreement exists.
- 11.2. Legal structure: The organisation of the URC means such principles, practices, and resources are harder to implement (eg they would have to be voluntarily adopted by Local Churches) and therefore successful implementation requires good change management. This also affects liability and risk ownership.
- 11.3. Return on investment: Although there are cost and potential head-count implications for a formalised Procurement operation, the cost benefits alone are usually worth the investment. For example, up to double-digit % savings are often possible, and a Procurement expert can save significantly more than the cost of their annual salary in just one mid- to large- value tender.
- 11.4. Ethical considerations: As with all buying, a procurement service would need to account for environmental and ecological impact, modern slavery, LOAF principles (Local, Organic, Animal-friendly, and Fairtrade), etc. Incorporation of these considerations into denominational buying practices may be made easier with a group buying service.

12. Potential Best-Fit Procurement Model for the URC

12.1. Overview: This proposal for a URC Procurement model considers the above information, with the aim to be fit-for-purpose so to help the URC achieve its mission and objectives whilst having control over this vital function.

12.2. Model:

12.2.1. *Denominational Procurement*

- A dedicated Church House function of trained and skilled Procurement personnel.
- Oversees URC Procurement strategy.
- Empowered to run tenders and arrange commercial agreements that could be used by the whole of the URC. However, the inclusion of Synod and Local Church requirements would depend on where such involvement would be most beneficial / viable (eg high cumulative spend categories - such as energy).
- The URC's centre of excellence for Procurement that provides training for Synods and Local Churches, including the creation and dissemination of standard resources.
- Responsible for any requirements only applicable to Church House operations.

12.2.2. *Regional Procurement*

- A dedicated Synod function of trained and skilled Procurement personnel.
- Employs URC Procurement strategy and standard resources.
- Empowered to run tenders and arrange commercial agreements that are region-specific, where involvement would be most beneficial / viable (eg common spend categories needing a local supply base - such as manse maintenance).
- Responsible for any requirements only applicable to Synod operations.
- Manages the ordering of goods and services needed by the relevant Synod that are subject to Denominational agreements, including the associated payments.
- Supports Denominational Procurement activities (eg provision of Synod expenditure data and lists of requirements).

12.2.3. *Local Procurement*

- At least one trained Local Church member per church.
- Aligns with URC Procurement strategy.
- Uses standard resources where possible and most beneficial.
- Responsible for requirements only applicable to the Local Church's operations.
- Manages the ordering of goods and services needed by the relevant Local Church that are subject to Regional or Denominational agreements, including the associated payments.
- Supports Regional and Denominational Procurement activities (eg provision of the Local Church's expenditure data and lists of requirements).

12.3. Benefits:

- 12.3.1. *Appropriate focus* – Places the relevant skill, attention, and capacity where the most value can be added.
- 12.3.2. *Balanced approach* – Has the benefits of a hybrid model, such as the potential for decent cost savings whilst still delivering Local Churches' needs.
- 12.3.3. *Organisational alignment* – Reflects the URC's current structure so a more natural evolution that should be easier to embed whilst achieving core aims.
- 12.3.4. *Promotes collaboration* – Communication and partnership between the different URC parties is built into - and integral to - this model.
- 12.3.5. *Strategic direction* – Procurement leadership from the 'centre', where the most comprehensive oversight of the URC and best missional alignment is possible.

12.4. Other considerations:

- 12.4.1. *Implementation* – A phased approach (probably starting with standard resource creation and dissemination) should be advantageous for a successful launch, establishment, and the maturity of this model.
- 12.4.2. *Interim* – Due to implementation timescales of such a model, more immediate Procurement benefits (eg cost savings) could be achieved by utilising ready-made third-party buying channels in the meantime, such as "Church Buying" from 2buy2 (as has been used by the Church of England and other UK denominations).
- 12.4.3. *Systems* – Common Procurement / ordering systems could be beneficial, especially for transparency of the biggest individual spending areas of the URC: Church House and Synods. However, the implications from the URC's legal structure and the associated costs may neutralise its impact.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1. This CLR activity is the perfect opportunity to improve the status quo of the URC's buying operations, which currently does a job but could be done smarter, more effectively, and with greater efficiency.
- 13.2. Incorporation of more systematic Procurement approaches and improved resources should have a multitude of benefits across the denomination, including - but not limited to - our Christian duty of being good stewards of God's provisions (eg Proverbs 21:20).
- 13.3. Success would be realised if the instinct of each person buying goods and services is not the likes of simply "*I will buy that from my favourite supplier because it is quick and I have the necessary funds*" but rather the likes of "*Should I buy that, from that supplier, for that price - even though I have enough budget?*" In such a culture, the other benefits should follow.
- 13.4. Sufficient time and effort should be given to finalising a suitable solution, using approaches such as benchmarking and cost benefit analysis, and also to implementing the selected model. [Note: Church consultation has been initiated via a survey.]

- 13.5. As a minimum (and potentially as a first phase), the creation and provision of a standard Procurement resources 'toolkit' and the centralisation of at least some Procurement activity is recommended.
- 13.6. Use of an existing third-party buying channel could be a relatively "quick win" whilst the final Procurement model is established and brought to maturity (and could even supplement the future approach). However, viability and affordability of this approach requires further investigation.

Paper A6

HR, IT, payroll, and property shared services

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Revd Dr John Bradbury, General Secretary john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 23 General Assembly affirms that, wherever possible, the provision of support services for local churches, provided by synods and General Assembly, is best done in a coordinated and joined up fashion. Assembly encourages the whole church to develop a culture in which we develop resources collectively for the benefit of the whole church, whilst engaging within synods and locally to ensure those resources actively support local congregational life.</p> <p>Resolution 24 General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with developing an IT infrastructure that has the potential to serve the General Assembly and the Synods.</p> <p>Resolution 25 General Assembly encourages synods to, when possible, move their IT infrastructure provision to that which has been developed for the whole church.</p> <p>Resolution 26a General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with bringing together key stakeholders together, to devise a means by which each local church has access to professional HR advice, at a minimum in the form of a helpline.</p> <p>Resolution 26b General Assembly encourages synods to work constructively and generously with the Resources Committee in working towards HR provision available to each local congregation within the United Reformed Church.</p>

	<p>Resolution 27a General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with developing a model of payroll services that can be made available to each synod and local church.</p> <p>Resolution 27b General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with consulting widely with synods and the members of the Church Life Fund Committee to arrive at a workable, affordable funding model for a shared payroll provision.</p> <p>Resolution 28 General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with hosting a consultation with a wide range of stakeholders from synods, General Assembly and the Retired Ministers' Housing Society to explore issues surrounding the existing, and possible future, arrangements for supporting the maintenance and development of buildings held in trust for United Reformed Church purposes.</p> <p>Resolution 29 Assembly instructs Resources Committee to prioritise this work, starting with more easily attainable shared services, like payroll and HR.</p>
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To review completed work and propose a future direction in relation to HR, IT, payroll, and property shared services.
Main points	<p>Executive summary This paper addresses the inconsistent patchwork of support services across the URC, focusing on HR, IT infrastructure, payroll, and property. Drawing on the proven safeguarding model, it proposes more joined-up provision to reduce duplication, strengthen Synods' ability to support local churches, and ensure reliable, professional services across the denomination.</p> <p>The aim is to enable cost-effective, high-quality support in core "back-office" areas, freeing local capacity for mission. Coordinated approaches to IT, HR advice, payroll systems, and property management will help address gaps, ease pressure on volunteers, and foster greater collaboration between Synods and Assembly structures.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 49)
Consultation has taken place with...	CLR Steering Group and Sub-Committee Business Committee Resources Committee

	Attendees at November 2024 CLR Shared Services Consultations (synod and trust officers, staff, and volunteers; Offices of General Assembly staff; others) Every synod, plus 10 local churches per synod, as part of the shared services survey Synod Moderators, Clerks, and Treasurers in various fora
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Summary of impact

Financial	It is intended that the cost for many of the shared services will be borne by the Church Life Fund. It is the intention that economies of scale will mean that the overall cost of services across the denomination is lower.
External (eg ecumenical)	Conversations with ecumenical partners, particularly the Methodist Church, have been part of the process, and will be an ongoing consideration in the establishment of new shared services.

1. Background

- 1.1. From the perspective of the local church, the first port of call when support is needed on almost any front is normally the synod. Whether a church is seeking support with developing their youth and children’s work, a major property development, training for Elders of health and safety, a vision for mission, or dealing with a situation which has gone wrong with an employee, it is to synods that churches turn (or should feel able to turn – we note a dual frustration that emerges at times with congregations feeling they lack the support they really need, and synods feeling that if only churches had come to them earlier or at all, they would have been able to give support they were not aware was needed).
- 1.2. Currently there is a huge patchwork of support services for local churches, which by and large has developed ad hoc, and on an area-by-area basis. In some areas, we develop denominational resources which local churches can access. The most clearly developed and appreciated resources which demonstrate how effective this can be are in the area of safeguarding. Here, policy and practice is developed denominationally through the publication of *Good Practice*, and the development of the training framework and online training provision.

Local churches are enabled to access this, and are supported in ensuring that material is tailored to their specific situation by Synod Safeguarding Officers, rooted in the nations and regions within which the United Reformed Church exists. Within that denominational provision, where necessary, there is national variation where the provisions in Wales or Scotland require specific material to be developed. There are other areas where denominational guidance is developed, for example around GDPR where resources are developed for the whole denomination, or registration with the Charity Commission in England and Wales.

- 1.3. In many other areas the nature and level of support available to local churches varies, particularly from synod to synod. Some synods have Human

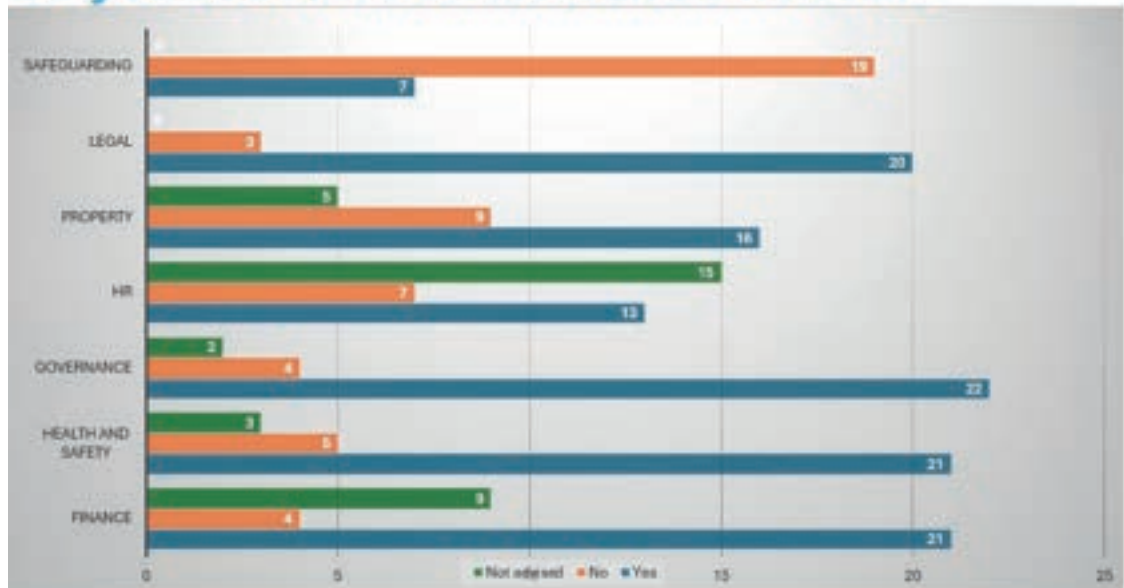
Resources support available to the synod and to local churches, while others do not. Some can offer support with accounting to local churches, while others cannot. The range of training, development and support roles varies, and support in areas like property varies from professionalised property officers to volunteers.

- 1.4. Whilst the overriding aim of the Church Life Review in terms of support services has been to support the flourishing of local churches, one aspect that has become clear is that synods, as the primary vehicles for that support, have in many cases few opportunities for creative collaboration. Hence, in a whole variety of areas, synods develop resources independently from one another. Each synod will take decisions on where it sources key support from in areas like HR, IT infrastructure, payroll – all the various ‘back-office’ functions that allow any organisation to function.
- 1.5. A major consultation on support services took place on 20-21st November 2024 at Kents Hill Park. This brought together relevant people from each synod and the Offices of General Assembly, to work through a variety of issues, and helpfully identified areas where collaboration across the synods and the General Assembly might better allow for effective working of synods themselves, and more effective supporting of local churches through the services that could be provided.
- 1.6. One thing which emerged clearly is the complexity of the current picture, and the variability in the ways in which synods source the necessary ‘back-office’ function which support synod and local church life. This makes any work in this area complex because we are not all starting in the same place. This often comes down to local experience. Some synods feel they have fantastic IT infrastructure provision; others have struggled to source the provision they need.

Some synods have arrangements with HR consultants, others have employed HR staff, yet others have no permanent HR support and seek it on an ad hoc basis. What are experienced as the ‘pressing needs’, therefore vary. Equally, whilst some synods might desire in principle to source service provision in a more collective way, they are tied into contracts with existing providers – some of whom might be excellent, others of whom might be more problematic.

- 1.7. Prior to the consultation, a survey had been conducted among a selected sample of local churches to gain a clearer understanding of the forms of support that churches are looking for. This has informed work both on the myURC Resources Hub, and also the shared services streams of work. One clear theme to emerge from this was the very strong appreciation for the support the United Reformed Church offers in total in the area of safeguarding. When asked whether the URC ‘could do more...’ to support in various areas, there was a strong sense that support in the area of safeguarding is already strong. In comparison, in other named areas, there was a strong feeling that more was possible, for example in support in areas such as legal, property, Human Resources, governance, health and safety and finance.

Do you believe the URC can do more...?



2. The lessons from safeguarding

- 2.1. A common theme has emerged in a number of ways in the last while within the life of the church, which is the effectiveness of our support in the area of safeguarding. It is noteworthy that if there is one area of the life of the Church we have invested in massively over the last decade or so, it is this area.

It was rare 15 years ago for there to be professional safeguarding officers in synods, the safeguarding team in the Offices of the General Assembly was a single person, and safeguarding was often structured as a sub-set of Children's and Youth Work. Now each synod has professional safeguarding support, and there is a team who work in safeguarding denominationally, continually developing and updating Good Practice and the training material, managing denominational cases, and supporting the case work of Synod Safeguarding Officers.

Whilst Synod Safeguarding Officers are employed by synods, there is good collaboration between them as a whole team, and excellent arrangements for covering across synods where necessary. Key in all of this is that we have one, excellent, up-to-date set of resources in the form of Good Practice and the Training Framework.

This is developed once, for the whole denomination (with variations where necessary in Scotland and Wales). The practical implementation and training, however, is supported within synods, by permanent staff rooted there who build effective working relationships and local knowledge, enabling the effective support of local churches.

- 2.2. It is notable that it was not only in the Shared Services Consultation that safeguarding emerged as an effective model. In a parallel consultation on the learning needs of the Church which brought together the key practitioners and those engaged in education and learning across the synods and General Assembly, it emerged as a highly respected model to follow there too (which was not an explicit Church Life Review consultation, but followed the good

practice we have developed in terms of effective consultations within the CLR, and using some of the same individuals to support it).

- 2.3. The kind of approach that is used in safeguarding in terms of standard denominational materials and resources, supported by hands-on support delivered locally, also emerged within the questionnaire before the Shared Services Consultation. One of the concluding aspects was that churches are looking for financial help, resources, and practical hands-on support. This was one of the summary slides from the presentation at the consultation:

Three broad areas of help requested...



Financial help – to outsource tasks, make things possible ...



Practical help – guidance, advice and hands-on support..



Resources – templates, directories, software, check-lists...

- 2.4. One point of note, which has resurfaced in a number of places recently, is that one of the challenges that safeguarding noted when presenting their model of working at the Shared Services Consultation was the lack of accessible shared IT provision. This is something felt keenly by those who work collaboratively across the denomination, but are rooted in synods.

Safeguarding Officers are one group, another are the Synod Moderators. Each synod has its own IT infrastructure, which might often be a Microsoft 365 infrastructure, supported by SharePoint in terms of file management and sharing (although not universally).

The General Assembly also has such an IT infrastructure. However, because each synod and the denomination as a whole have their own IT infrastructure and SharePoint (where it is used), many people end up needing at times to work in the denominational SharePoint (accessing and working effectively with the Case Management System used to track and monitor safeguarding, disciplinary and complaints cases) or the materials that support moderators in their work, but for their day-to-day basic IT work, have to work within the synod infrastructure. This often necessitates them having two different Microsoft 365 accounts (each of which costs): one to log into the denominational SharePoint, another to access synod systems. We note this at this point in the report, as it is an example of where the lack of joined-up provision in one area impacts the effectiveness of its operation in other areas.

3. Moving forward from the Shared Services Consultation

- 3.1. There was a high level of energy and desire to move forward on various fronts that emerged within the consultation. There was an initial sense that in some areas, there might be some 'easy wins', and that it might be possible to move ahead of the wider Church Life Review process. However, that has not proved possible instantly, in part because there are certain key building blocks which would need to be in place to enable this. One key element of this is the staffing restructure which has taken place in the Offices of the General Assembly.

This, in and of itself, has not attempted to provide the levels of capacity which might be needed to deliver on some of the aspirations which emerged from the consultation, but has attempted to ensure that at the level of the structure itself, and the levels of expertise in key roles is such that the delivery of more widespread shared services provision amongst and between synods and the General Assembly can be supported.

Additional capacity might well be required, and this may or may not be located within the Offices of the General Assembly, in many ways much of it would be better located within the nations and regions we serve. There needs to be a level of expertise available to facilitate and enable evolution in the way the consultation imagined. Where this impacts on different areas of potential shared provision, we will indicate in the relevant sections below.

4. Key areas for exploration which emerged within the consultation

- 4.1. Resolution 49 of General Assembly 2023 asked the Church Life Review process to explore support for local churches in areas including (but not exclusively) finance, property, health and safety, Human Resources and safeguarding. Some of these are clearly addressed in proposals elsewhere in this Assembly (in terms of accounting support for local churches, and the content of the portal). Emerging from the consultation were a range of areas where support services might be helpfully developed between the synods and General Assembly.

Those areas which were seen as the most potentially helpful were HR advice, IT infrastructure, payroll and church closures. Church closure is a complex matter, because the arrangements that each individual synod trust company has when it comes to the disposal of buildings will vary. There is a range of technical advice which it would be possible to develop collaboratively, and there is no technical bar to standardising disposal processes (in that they are all controlled by the same legal framework set out in the URC Act of Parliament).

This is one area which, as work on the portal develops over time, can sit within the portal, and therefore is not addressed explicitly within this paper. The remainder of this paper addresses HR advice, IT Infrastructure and Payroll as areas which might, in a reasonably short space of time, become areas where the whole church, including local churches, might benefit from working towards shared provision.

5. IT infrastructure

- 5.1. It has been noted above that in various areas where we do collaborate together effectively, a source of frustration can be the lack of a shared IT infrastructure to enable the smooth performance of collaborative work.
- 5.2. It is important in addressing the question of IT infrastructure to be clear about two distinct ways in which we need to think about IT support. One is the behind-the-scenes system that is being used. This is often a Microsoft 365 system, where an organisation has a file storage structure in SharePoint, which allows for collaborative working and sharing of documents within an organisation whilst keeping material secure and in ways compliant with GDPR.

This is the basic system that is used, although it is not used by every synod. This is a different thing from the kind of support for the use of IT which is provided by someone who supports an individual user with use of their personal computer or laptop. For ease of reference, 'IT infrastructure' will refer to that overall system, and 'user support' as that which directly assists users and their devices.

- 5.3. For many IT users, when things go wrong, there is nothing more helpful than a real human standing alongside them to assist in resolving whatever issue has arisen. Whilst remote support, and phonelines, can offer helpful support, there will be moments when a real human being is required onsite. This can be, however, sourced separately from the IT infrastructure which is being used (although, some larger, national, providers may offer on-the-ground support across the three nations).
- 5.4. There is already a working example of shared IT infrastructure. The Synod of Wales has, for some years, used the IT infrastructure of the Offices of the General Assembly. Their users have email addresses which are from the General Assembly system. The synod has its own section on the URC SharePoint, but the licenses and back-end system are the General Assembly infrastructure. Support in terms of user issues with the interface (difficulties logging on, or the need to set up new users on the system, and so on) is provided by IT staff at Church House. Local arrangements are in place, however, for user support onsite. This is a model that could be extended to incorporate other synods over time.
- 5.5. Each synod at the moment has its own provision. The experience of this provision varies, from that found to be excellent, to that found to be dreadful! There will clearly be greater reluctance to consider shifting provider to one that serves the URC as a whole where existing experiences are positive. All synods are likely to be tied into contracts for periods of time, which makes shifting provider impossible until the end of a contract period.
- 5.6. It is also necessary for the General Assembly IT infrastructure to be able to expand in the necessary ways, and for the whole Church to have confidence in it. We changed supplier around three years ago, and whilst performance has been satisfactory, it has not been to the levels that we would have hoped. We are in the process of running a project to award the contract for IT infrastructure provision to the General Assembly, to identify a provider who

can deliver excellent, not merely satisfactory, service. Part of that process will be to ensure that any new vendor can provide an IT infrastructure that is expandable in ways which would allow, over time, other synods to come onboard with the General Assembly IT provision.

- 5.7. We believe that there is likely to be a cost benefit overall, taking what the Assembly and the 13 synods are each separately paying for IT provision currently. It is impossible to know the scale of this, and it is important to factor in that many synods may currently get their IT infrastructure and on-site support from the same place, and on-site support would still be required to be sourced, which may be better sourced locally than as part of denominational provision. Thought would need to be given to how we might best mitigate risks associated with a non-local service provision.
- 5.8. We believe that there will be significant benefits, including to our ability to share information and resources, as well as limiting the number of Microsoft 365 accounts those folk who work across both the URC as a whole and within a specific synod need, to make moving in this direction worthwhile. It is obviously something that the General Assembly cannot demand of synods, but can strongly encourage.

The best encouragement, however, will be the lived reality of excellent IT infrastructure in the experience of those using it. Our hope is that, over time, as existing synod contracts come to an end, it will be possible to migrate synods into the URC-wide system. Doing this in a phased way, over an extended period of time, is likely to lead to better results than attempting to migrate everyone at the same time.

- 5.9. It is hoped that at the least, the shift envisaged would be cost-neutral to the denomination overall, and that the costs would continue to be borne from existing synod IT budgets, rather than making calls on the Church Life Fund.

6. Human Resources provision

- 6.1. There exists a complex patchwork of support available to synods, and to local churches, with regard to HR provision. Some synods have a member of staff who handles HR for the synod and may be available to local churches. Others use a consultancy on a permanent basis; others make ad hoc arrangements as necessary. The General Assembly Office has Human Resources expertise available to it. As part of the recent staffing restructure, a 'People and Benefits' department has been created, which brings together the areas of HR, Payroll, Pensions and any other related administrative support function. A Head of People and Benefits has been appointed, who is an expert in HR.
- 6.2. It is clear that as more local churches employ lay workers, which is already happening in many places and we hope will be more widely possible through the Church Life Fund, it will be necessary for local churches to be able to access high quality, and easily available HR resources. Some of these needs will be met through the myURC Resources Hub, which will provide pro-forma policies, processes and templates. However, many local contexts will need assistance to tailor generic advice to specific local requirements, and may well over time require more specialised HR support, either as changes need to be made to staffing structures, or when issues such as grievances or

performance management arise.

- 6.3. The HR staff of the Offices of the General Assembly have always, when they have had capacity, tried to help local congregations or synods when they run into HR difficulties. This has been an informal arrangement, and one not widely publicised, because capacity has been very limited. As noted above, provision within synods varies considerably.
- 6.4. It seems that there are some basic principles we would wish to adhere to in thinking about how we move forward to better provide joined-up HR support and provision for local congregations, synods and the General Assembly.
- 6.5. That pro-forma policies and processes should be developed only once as denominational resources, rather than multiple times over (employment, not being a devolved matter, is unlikely to require material developing separately for Wales and Scotland, but the varied legal contexts may require some material to be contextualised appropriately).
- That where there is existing local expertise and knowledge of the HR context in synods, this should be retained as a valuable and difficult to replace resource.
 - That each local church, at a basic level, should have HR expertise available to it, at a minimum in the form of a helpline to offer assistance in making local use of denominationally available pro-formas, and for advice in handling difficult cases as they arise.
 - That the gold standard is HR resource rooted within the nations and regions, available to people in-person and locally.
- 6.6. Achieving HR resources that are available to every local church that needs it, from the context of our current patchwork provision will be a challenge, and can only be evolved over time. The approach we propose is to invite the Resources Committee to act in taking a lead in initially mapping in more detail the existing arrangements across the life of the Church, identifying key stakeholders (such as existing HR employees within synods, or consultancies on permanent retainers, or staff within synods who may not technically be HR experts but act as a help to churches) and bringing them together to consult, and to form what initially might be a loose HR network across the denomination.

From this, it will be possible to evaluate more carefully provision which needs to be bolstered. This may be through increasing capacity in the People and Benefits department, to ensure that a phonenumber service can be offered to the whole church. This may, where there is better suited local provision, point people to synod staff or retained consultants. It may offer support directly where more local support is unavailable. It would be entirely possible for any increase in staffing required to give this capacity to be located not in London, but potentially in a synod office (or even working remotely).

- 6.7. There is a sense in which, given the patchwork provision we currently have, we will need to evolve how this can better function as a whole, to provide support to every local church within the denomination. It may be that initially, there is basic helpdesk provision for everyone, but some places have more

local support that can be referred to. It may be that existing HR expertise within synods could be made available more widely, as part of a team who provide HR support to the whole denomination. One could imagine, in time, a network of HR advisers covering the whole denomination, located regionally (or within the nations of Wales and Scotland).

We recognise that this is unlikely to be an employee per synod, as many will simply not generate sufficient HR work to merit this; regionally located staff who work as part of a denominationally coordinated team might better enable support, particularly when someone attending in-person locally would be helpful. This can only be worked through in what will be an evolving set of conversations, over a long period of time, involving synods, the People and Benefits department of the Assembly, and existing synod staff who support HR.

There will inevitably be questions about the funding arrangements, which we believe will be best answered, initially at least, in ad hoc ways depending on the existing arrangements. It may be that synods who budget for HR support would, over time, be willing to pool this expenditure with others to assist in forming a wider HR network. It may be that to achieve denominational provision, we need to seek funding from the Church Life Fund.

It may be that as CLF work evolves, synods will evolve their contributions to the fund partly on the basis of being willing to pay more into the fund at points at which they start to access more services from the fund. The massive variation (not just financially, but also structurally, in terms of the availability of volunteers, and a whole range of factors) between the 13 synods suggests that only approaching this with grace and generosity, rather than attempting to pre-determine what 'fairness' might look like, will achieve what is needed.

7. Payroll

- 7.1. As with HR, there is a very patchwork provision for payroll across the denomination. The payroll of the offices of the General Assembly runs the payroll for all Ministers and staff of the Assembly. It also runs the payroll for some synods, and for Westminster College, as well as the Minister's Pension Fund – and therefore pays the pensions of all retired ministers. This is not something which has ever been a paid-for service.
- 7.2. Looking forward, once the buy-out of the Ministers' Pension Scheme is achieved, the payroll provision will move to the insurer who is purchasing the scheme. This will considerably increase the capacity within existing provision. That this will happen at a moment when there is increased employment of lay workers within the denomination is potentially fortuitous. Many local churches who have employees may make use of a payroll company, at some cost, who will run their payroll for them. Some may rely on volunteers to do this (who become ever harder to find). It should be possible to envisage the provision of a payroll service that could serve the needs of the whole denomination. It is difficult to estimate the capacity that would be required, and it will shift over time.
- 7.3. Again, we believe that it is most helpful to ask the Resources Committee to oversee the creation of a payroll service that can serve the whole

denomination. This would not require anyone to use it, but hopefully will offer a cost-effective way of providing payroll for local churches and synods. Until the scale is fully understood, we will not be able to estimate fully the capacity that will be required, and whether this would be met through funding from the Church Life Fund, or whether existing provision, repurposed, along with small subventions from users, would be the most appropriate way to fund this. This we would envisage being part of the work the Resources Committee would pick up, consulting widely as they do.

8. Property

- 8.1. The property portfolio of the United Reformed Church is vast. It runs, probably, to a portfolio worth upwards of a billion pounds, if one considers every church building and every manse. It is impossible to fully know, because a quirk of accounting regulations mean that most properties held in trust for the URC do not appear on any balance sheet (they are held in trust normally by synods, and so don't appear on the balance sheet of local churches, but equally are held in trust for local churches, and cannot be sold by synods and the funds applied to something else without resolution of the Church Meeting, so they don't appear on synod trust company balance sheets as disposable assets of the company).

When one also adds in the sister organisation of the URC, the Retired Ministers' Housing Society (RMHS), our combined property portfolio is even larger. Some manses, owned by Synods in manse schemes, but not directly attached to specific local churches, will appear on balance sheets – and in some instances auditors have insisted that manses held in manse schemes appear on synod trust company balance sheets).

- 8.2. Not only are our buildings one of the greatest resources we have financially, they are also one of the major investments in our mission. In local communities up and down our three nations, our buildings form a core part of our mission, evangelism, witness, and service within local communities. They are often viewed by those not directly associated with the church itself, as valuable community assets.
- 8.3. We are aware that one thing we heard loud and clear in all the consultation in phase one of the CLR is that local churches want much more help with property. Many congregations are struggling to keep on top of maintenance of buildings which are often complex, and require specialist knowledge to engage effectively in terms of maintenance or development. Most synods and synod trust companies put huge amounts of time and effort into trying to support congregations with their buildings, and yet the experience on the ground is that far more is required. At the same time, many people within synods are working well beyond reasonable capacity delivering what is already offered.
- 8.4. We have not had the capacity, or time, to do this issue justice in this phase of the CLR. We are, however, very aware that we were tasked with doing so, and that if there is one thing that local churches are often crying out for, it is more support with their buildings. This is partly because engaging with this as a topic is so complex and difficult. Structurally, we could not be more complicated if we tried. The URC Act of Parliament which controls our

property determines the trusts under which local churches and the manses of local churches are held. These make clear that the trustees, whilst having overall responsibility for the buildings, are not expected to be responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of them or provide funds for that – this has always been the responsibility of the congregations for whom the buildings are held in trust. Each synod trust company operates in a somewhat different way, even though they are all operating identical trusts on each building held under the URC Act of Parliament. Some synods have a synod manse scheme; some do not. Each scheme operates somewhat differently to the other schemes.

- 8.5. We have a situation where 1,200 local churches each have their own approach to maintaining their buildings, supported in different ways to different extents in different synods. By and large, our building maintenance rests in the hands of volunteers, who are increasingly hard to find. As building work becomes bound up in ever more regulation, having the expertise to even know where to begin, particularly where listed buildings are concerned, can be challenging. Many synods are finding they can no longer run their listed buildings advisory groups in a meaningful way.
- 8.6. And yet, we return to the reality that this is how, at the moment, together as the Church, we are exercising our responsibility for over a billion pounds of assets. There is a very strong sense that ‘there must be a better way’. Working out what a better way might be, never mind how one might get from where we are, to a better way, is challenging indeed. We also look at some ecumenical partners who run a more centralised approach to holding buildings in trust and offering support in this, and recognise that this does not necessarily provide a neat and effective model to follow!
- 8.7. It is the conviction of the current CLR Steering Group that we ought to initiate a further consultation, bringing together a wide range of people from all synods who might be considered stakeholders in terms of property management, which are likely to be people from trusts and property officers. Prior to this, some further consultation with local congregations about the types of support they might be looking for would probably be helpful.

Our experience to date has been that getting all the relevant people together for a well-facilitated conversation has only ever produced excellent results. For the reasons outlined briefly in this section of the report, attempting to grapple with the issues that surround our denominational stewardship of the properties that those who went before have bequeathed us is massively complex. Even if all an initial consultation can do is map the issues, and dream some dreams – that would be potentially a starting point.

9. Funding for HR, IT, payroll, and property services

- 9.1. Services provided by the Offices of General Assembly (for example, payroll) are currently funded out of the M&M budget. Some synods are funding their own services in areas like IT provision.
- 9.2. As explored above, the split of funding for any new shared services will need to be considered as part of an evolving conversation between Church Life Fund Committee, Resources Committee, and synods.

10. Integration with the resources hub helpdesk

- 10.1. Where relevant and appropriate, shared services will be integrated with the myURC Resources Hub helpdesk function. When relevant calls are received and triaged by the helpdesk, they will be forwarded to one of the shared services. This is of particular relevance to the HR provision.

Paper A7

Eido report on models of lay worker employment across the URC

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 30 General Assembly receives the findings of the Eido report, and notes and endorses the model and toolkit outlined in the appendices.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To examine models of lay worker employment in the URC.
Main points	Eido's executive summary is provided after the report title page.
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 51)
Consultation has taken place with...	Eido Research Eight case study locations across the URC (interviewees: employer representative(s), line managers, and lay workers) CLR Steering Group and Sub-Committee Business Committee Resources Committee

Summary of impact

Financial	None
External (eg ecumenical)	None

Assessing models of lay worker employment in the URC

June 2025

V3.3

Executive summary

This report examines two models by which lay workers are currently employed within the URC: church-employed and Synod-employed. It explores the benefits and limitations of these models and makes recommendations for how each might be strengthened, as well as the circumstances in which a particular model might work best.

These findings are based on in-depth interviews with 24 lay workers, line managers, and Synod or church representatives from eight URC case studies where a lay worker is employed under one of these models.

In cases where churches employ lay workers directly, the church requires members (generally elders) with the necessary skills, knowledge, and capacity to employ and manage staff effectively. They also need access to financial resources, either internally or through grants. When these conditions are met, churches are generally able to provide good employment.

The benefits of this model are often due to the close connection between the lay worker, the church, and their line manager(s). The main weaknesses of this model are the amount of work and potential risk for a local church, and the challenge of keeping up to date with UK employment law and best practice.

Churches that employ lay workers would like more support from their Synod or Church House in the form of template documents, easy-to-access HR advice, and assurance that they will receive support if something goes wrong.

Churches would be more open to employing lay workers through a Synod if they knew the worker would be committed to their local church and community, and that the Synod would not seek to control the activities of the lay worker.

In cases where lay workers are employed by the Synod, lay workers particularly appreciated high levels of freedom and trust from the Synod, the wider perspective a Synod can offer, and relatively robust employment. This model reduces the workload and risk for local churches while still allowing churches to maintain a high degree of agency regarding the activities of the lay worker.

Despite fears articulated by some churches who employ workers directly, synods were not found to want to control the activities of the lay worker. They do want to ensure lay workers are employed well and that the activities of the lay worker connect with the wider vision and mission of the local church.

Business Committee

The biggest challenge articulated by participants regarding the Synod-employed model stems from the distance between the Synod-based line manager and the context within which the lay worker is working.

Across both models, frequent themes that emerged were:

- The need to strengthen the line management of lay workers
- The importance of gaining clarity and alignment between synods, churches, and lay workers before the lay worker starts
- The desire and the struggle to keep up to date with UK employment law and best practice
- Churches' desire to have sufficient control over who is employed, and the activities the lay worker will focus on
- Concerns about what support will be available if something goes wrong in an employment situation
- Good relationships and good people can hide weaknesses in a system
- The desire for parity of employment in pension and salary, regardless of the employment model.

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Section 1 – Introduction

Purpose of the research

The General Assembly asked the Church Life Review (CLR) to examine the infrastructure and models of lay work in support of local churches (GA 2023, Resolution 51). The CLR Steering Group commissioned Eido to explore eight different sites where lay workers are employed, either directly by churches or by synods.

The aim of the research was to explore:

- How these two models of employment work in different contexts
- The extent to which each model is an effective way of employing lay workers (highlighting the strengths and limitations of each)
- What additional infrastructure is needed to help each model work
- Where one model might be more effective to another, and in which circumstances.

The aim of this project was not to evaluate the performance of individuals or church communities, nor the effectiveness of certain types of roles, but rather the effectiveness of the models used to employ lay workers.

The findings of this report are intended to help guide the CLR Steering Group in offering proposals to General Assembly in November 2025 regarding the best way—or ways—of employing lay workers within URC churches.

Research methodology

In consultation with Myles Dunnitt (CLR Programme Manager), Eido developed a research plan to meet the project aims outlined above. The main phases of the research process are outlined below:

- **Sample recruitment.** Myles Dunnitt identified eight suitable sites for enquiry, then gained agreement to take part with each site. At each site, we requested to speak to the lay worker themselves, the lay worker's line manager, and then a representative of the church or Synod who was involved in the employment of the lay worker. The hope was to speak to four church-employed and four Synod-employed sites. Due to availability, and also to include an LEP site (Local Ecumenical Partnership), we ended up with five church-employed, and three Synod-employed sites. More detail about the roles and participating churches is provided within the relevant sections of this report.
- **Participant interviews.** Eido conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant (24 participants in total). These video-conference interviews, which lasted a maximum of one hour, gave Eido the opportunity to ask specific questions related to the research aims, while also allowing participants freedom to share insights they thought could be relevant for the Steering Group to hear. The Eido researchers took thorough notes during the interviews and recorded them to allow them to go back and fact-check and get more detail where necessary. To increase the likelihood of participation, as well as help generate fuller and more honest data, participants were guaranteed anonymity.

- **Qualitative analysis.** The Eido researchers kept a rolling research log of what they thought were key insights and possible themes as the interviews went along. When all the interviews were complete, they then used ‘thematic analysis’, looking at what themes emerged for each individual model, as well as general themes which came through across all interviews.
- **Report writing.** The themes and insights that emerged from the analysis, and Eido’s reflections on those, form the basis of this report. We have sought to be faithful in reflecting the thoughts and experiences of all participants. Along the way we highlight contextual nuances and put participants’ views in context, where those views differ from the experiences and views of others.

The positive impact of lay workers

Whilst the aim of this research is not to evaluate the effectiveness of individual workers, roles, churches, or synods, we want to begin our report highlighting the positive contribution the lay workers we heard about make to the work and ministry of local churches.

Throughout the interviews, it quickly became apparent that the employment of lay workers is helping to both kick-start and enhance mission and ministry activity across the URC. A few highlights include:

- Increased amount of work with young people and families
- Improving the quality of work churches do with young people and families
- Increased capacity and ability for churches to connect with and serve their local communities
- Churches connecting with and serving a more diverse cross-section of their local communities (in terms of age, ethnicity, and socio-economic background)
- Churches growing in number – whether increased participation in groups/activities throughout the week, or attendance at services and growth in membership
- People growing in their faith and discipleship journeys
- An increased sense of life within local churches, characterised by a renewed passion for mission and ministry among elders and members, and an increased sense of hope as they see God at work through them.

Section 2 – The Church-Employed Model

This section of the report covers results we gained from the case studies of a church-employed lay worker.

2.1 Summary of the five case study sites

We interviewed three people from each of five sites where a lay worker (or lay workers) is employed directly by the church. Three of these churches follow a ‘typical’ URC church structure, one is a CIO, and the other is an LEP.

Three of these churches employ a lay worker in a community outreach, connection, or pioneering-type role (all part-time). One church employs a full-time children’s, youth, and families’ worker, and another employs a full-time local church leader. All these churches had previously employed at least one lay worker, and some are currently employing multiple lay workers across a range of roles. Two of the lay workers have been in post for three or more years, while three have only been in post for around six months.

Geographically, three of these churches are based in the North of England, one in the Midlands, and one in Greater London. All of these lay workers were already based locally or had an existing connection with the local area or church.

2.2 How this model works

Though all of these workers are employed directly by the local church, the funding model varies, and at some sites it has changed over time. At the time of interviewing, these five sites are funding the lay worker in the following ways:

- Two churches cover 100% of the lay worker’s employment costs
- Two are 100% covered by the Synod
- One is 50% Synod-funded, with the other 50% being covered by a mix of church funds and external grants.

In cases where roles are part or fully funded by Synod, it’s highly unlikely these roles would otherwise exist.

Four of these five churches have at least one person involved in setting up and maintaining the employment arrangement who has a high level of experience related to employing and/or managing people. In one case, this was the Minister, but generally speaking, this expertise is found within the eldership. These are people who have experience in areas such as HR, finance, and line-managing people in the private, public, or charitable sector. Some are still working in these sectors, but the majority are retired.

Most of these churches have some kind of steering group or management group that helps to set up and oversee the employment of the lay worker. Sometimes this management group consists purely of people from inside the church, and in others it also involves someone from the Synod.

The primary line manager for each of these lay workers varies:

- Three have the Minister
- One has a lay elder
- One has someone from the Synod.

All lay workers have some additional line-management type support and/or oversight from others – generally the management/steering group.

As will be described below, some churches have wanted and been able to receive help and support from the Synod in setting up the employment, whereas others have received less help in this regard.

2.3 Benefits of the church employed model for the worker, the church, and the Synod

This section outlines what we found about the benefits of the church employed model for three stakeholders involved: the worker, the church, and the Synod.

For the worker

There was broad consensus across the interviews with line managers, the church representatives, and the lay workers themselves. The main benefits of the lay worker being employed directly by the church can be brought together under two headings.

Clearer and closer line management

Being employed directly by the church means there is one less layer of management than if the lay worker were employed by the Synod, where they would have both an off-site manager and an on-site day-to-day manager/supervisor. Participants described this closer form of management as simpler because decisions can be made quickly and locally. It also means the line manager (and management team) see the worker and their work regularly, giving them a better understanding of what the worker is doing. This more regular contact makes it easier for issues to be discussed and resolved quickly. Some participants mentioned very practical matters, such as being able to reimburse the lay worker for expenses promptly.

Participants supposed that if their primary line manager were based further away, the manager would have less understanding of what the worker is doing, the context they are working in, and communication would be harder and less frequent.

Though in some ways being line-managed directly by people within the church creates a simpler structure, the line management situation wasn't entirely straightforward (as described in the section below).

Increased sense of connection with the church and local community

Most participants also said that being employed by the church guarantees the worker is able to focus on the ministry and mission of the local church within their local area.

Because the lay worker would have been chosen by the local church¹, the local church is more involved in their employment, the lay worker is more likely to feel a greater sense of connection to the local church, and the local church to them.

In most of these instances, the lay worker is/has become a member of the local church, which increases the sense of belonging.

¹ Though this may also sometimes be the case of a lay worker employed by the Synod, it is always true in the case of a church-employed worker.

Lots of participants expressed a fear that if the lay worker was employed by the Synod, they think they would perhaps have less sense of connection to the local church and would probably be asked to work across a greater number of churches and a wider geographical area².

This fear may not reflect what actually happens or would happen: if a church and a Synod had an agreement in place regarding the location and focus of a lay worker, this could be honoured. However, the fear is real and therefore needs to be addressed.

For the church

Greater control

The main benefit participants reported for the church was that it gives the church a greater sense of control over what the job roles will be, who they employ, and what that worker focuses their time and energy on day-to-day. Some also perceived that employing the worker directly makes it easier for them to care for the worker, because they can take more responsibility for the worker, and make decisions that impact the worker quickly.

Whilst this is an important perception to note, it's also true that Synod model interviewees shared a duty of care to those they employ.

It's also interesting to note that churches who receive funding from the Synod for the lay worker did not feel the Synod was in any way dictating the terms of the person's employment or were particularly onerous when it came to accountability. And churches who were employing workers with Synod funding did not feel any less sense of control.

Increased sense of ownership from the church

Because the church has thought hard about who they want to employ and have invested time (and sometimes money) into employing this person, they have an increased sense of ownership. This sense of ownership is as much to the ministry of the lay worker as to the lay worker themselves. With one exception, these church-employed workers described a strong link between themselves, the work they are doing, and the wider church.

Additionally, most of these churches described how having a lay worker has helped to energise and re-focus people in the church on the particular area the lay worker is focused on (e.g. community outreach or working with young people).

There was also a sense that the worker was more likely to remain committed to the local church over the long-term, whereas they felt a Synod-employed worker could be moved to another site after a certain amount of time. However, it is possible for a lay worker to be employed by a Synod and assigned to a specific church (or churches), which would be contractually binding.

Greater focus on mission and ministry within the local church and area

Just as this was seen as a benefit for the lay worker, a greater focus on mission and ministry was also described as being positive for the church and the local community.

² There is an example in section 3 of the report, which shows a Synod-employed worker can be committed and connected to just one church.

Participants liked that the lay worker doesn't have lots of Synod-related/directed work that they would also have to do in addition to locally focused ministry.

Faster decision-making process for the church

Some participants mentioned they thought the process of managing the lay worker is simpler to do in-house, rather than having to involve the Synod in decisions they wanted to make. Having one less 'layer' of decision-making is seen as a benefit by churches.

For the Synod

Participants generally had little to say when asked what benefit they thought this model provides for the Synod. The two main things that came up were that it obviously means less work and responsibility for the Synod, and that Synods could still benefit from the wisdom and learning lay workers develop through their ministry.

2.4 The limitations of the church employed model for the worker, the church, and the Synod

This section outlines what we found about the limitations of the model for three stakeholders involved: the worker, the church, and the Synod.

For the worker

The overall tone of the interviews was positive: lay workers and the churches employing them are broadly positive about how things are going (apart from in one case). However, the workers and the churches employing them did talk about some challenges and limitations.

Potentially lower pay and benefits

This came up explicitly in interviews with two of the sites and could potentially be true in others as well. The other sites did mention financial concerns in relation to the longevity of the employment, which may also be affecting pay rates, pension contributions, and other benefits (or lack thereof).

In one instance, the worker was initially offered a very low rate of pay, especially considering the level of experience this person possessed. In another church, the church representative and the Minister/line-manager said they think they have been paying their lay worker less than if this person had been employed through the Synod. This became apparent when they saw a similar job role advertised, but with a higher rate of pay (they are now looking to increase their lay worker's pay).

That same church also talked about the pension contribution being lower than if the person were employed by the Synod. Interestingly, when a Synod-employed worker asked why they preferred that model to being employed by the church, they immediately said, 'Pension contributions!'

Less stable employment

Across the interviews, participants alluded to a sense of fragility or 'tenderness' in the long-term employment of lay workers when employed by a church. Finance is a big issue for churches. As one Minister pointed out, churches tend to be 'very conservative when it comes to finances' – they don't want to commit to employing somebody over a long period of time, in case they can no longer afford to do so.

Therefore, most of these workers are on limited-time contracts (typically three years).

While this is a reality, for context, it's important to bear in mind that Synod-employed workers are also often on limited-time contracts.

Ambiguity regarding paid hours and hours worked

Whilst none of the lay workers complained about this, some did mention that they generally work more hours than they are paid for (these were staff employed on a part-time basis). This issue was also picked up by some church representatives as well.

This matter is slightly muddled by the fact that many lay workers are also members of a church, and they are often happy to do some things in that capacity as a volunteer member. There can also be ambiguity around 'what counts as work', e.g. attending conferences, social events, etc.

What seems to help this situation is when there is clarity around what is paid work, and what is voluntary. And it's also very important that there is clear communication between the worker, the line-manager, and the wider church.

Whilst important to pay attention to, this issue is not limited to church-employed lay workers, or even to the URC – this is an issue for many people who work for churches, where the lines between paid and voluntary are often ambiguous and blurred.

Some weaknesses in line management

The issue of line management came up in the interviews with both church-employed and Synod-employed sites. Within the church-employed situations, the picture was mixed.

As described above, participants had positive things to say about line management. However, the general message coming through from both the lay workers and the line managers is that line management isn't as strong or clear as it could be. From both perspectives, the people doing the line management don't always have sufficient line-management expertise to perform the function optimally.

Some line managers don't know exactly what to ask, how best to support the lay worker, and there can sometimes be situations where the lay worker is needing to 'manage upwards': helping the line manager ask the right questions, etc. As well as sometimes lacking line-management skills, the line-manager might also lack knowledge about the specialist area the lay worker is operating in, which can compound the problem.

This issue manifests in different ways. Some described being over-managed, where they don't feel they are being afforded the trust and freedom they need to work as effectively as they would like. Others described a more laissez-faire approach, and would actively welcome greater support, accountability, and challenge.

For the church

Increased workload for Ministers and Elders

This issue was raised by virtually every church representative and line manager. Employing somebody effectively demands a combination of energy, time, and

knowledge. This is especially true when it comes to setting up the employment, but it also requires an ongoing commitment.

Whether these demands fall primarily on the Minister, the elders, management team, or a combination of those, it's generally work that falls on the shoulders of people who are already busy and often overstretched.

Most of these churches are managing to keep up with the requirements of employing a lay worker (or lay workers), but some did raise questions about how sustainable this will be long-term. Some said that all it would take would be for one or two individuals to leave the church for them to be in a position where they would really struggle to keep up with the demands of employing someone. When asked about shouldering the line management responsibilities, along with everything else they have to do, one Minister confessed, 'It's heavy'.

It's important to note that, though most of these employment situations are generally functioning quite well, this finding is heavily influenced by the churches that took part in the research. In various interviews, participants shared examples from other church-employed contexts where things have gone badly wrong.

Financial challenges

Employing someone requires a huge financial investment. Where a role is funded by the Synod, this is less of an issue – though there is still the question of what would happen if the funding isn't renewed.

For churches who are part or whole funding, this can be very stressful. Two of the churches are doing their best to gain funds from external donors and have or are about to enlist the services of professional grant-writers. Churches are working hard to generate the funds to pay for workers, but they aren't finding it easy.

Keeping up-to-date and maintaining processes

The legal requirements of employing someone are not static; the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees change over time. Keeping up with these changes can be challenging. Participants think they are generally keeping up, but the majority don't have a clear strategy to ensure they find out about changes before/when they take effect. Lots of them said they would like help with this. Despite many of those responsible for overseeing the employment having experience in HR (or related areas), many of them are retired, and therefore might not have the most up-to-date knowledge.

Increasingly, employers are expected to have a range of policies and processes in place. Ensuring these are all set up correctly at the beginning takes a lot of work. On top of this, there is the ongoing challenge of keeping these policies and processes up-to-date and ensuring that people actually follow them! This can be particularly tricky in a local church.

One church representative said they think generally people are doing things correctly in their church, but it's hard to know if everybody is following the processes, and there is not someone who has a clear authority or legitimacy to check that people are doing everything as they should. In another church, participants were pretty sure they aren't

following procedures as they should. They especially recognised that they need some help from the outside.

Challenges accessing Synod support

On the whole, participants spoke warmly about their Synod. All of them have received at least some help in setting up and/or maintaining the employment of their lay workers.

Three of the churches described a strong and healthy relationship with the Synod and could share several examples of how they had received support. But one of the churches said that while the Synod had been really helpful with something else they had needed to do, when it came to employing someone the support has been patchy.

This church said they ended up needing to do pretty much everything themselves, and did not have help when it came to things like setting up the contract, creating a staff handbook, and ensuring they had all the correct policies in place. The LEP church have primarily leaned on the denominational structures of the other partner church.

Lack of security if/when ‘things go wrong’

Whilst things are going pretty well in most of these employment case studies in one, there seems to have been something of a breakdown in communication between the lay worker, and the line manager and church leadership. Because records have not been kept by the previous line manager, and because processes haven't been followed, the church is now unsure how to deal with the situation.

In the other churches, where things are going well, most participants said the reason things are going well is partly due to the processes that are in place, and partly because they have employed the right person, and there are good relationships between the lay worker and the leadership of the church. A number of them said everything is fine at the moment, but they are not sure what they would do if something went wrong, which required HR/legal expertise.

In one of the interviews, a participant shared an example from a church that wasn't part of this sample, where a lay worker had identified malpractice within the church. The person they observed doing something they believed was wrong was also their line manager. In that situation, the lay worker felt they had nowhere to go with their concern.

For the Synod

No meaningful data arose in the interviews relating to the limitations of this model for Synods.

2.5 Success factors that impact the effectiveness of church employed model, and additional support churches are drawing upon

This section outlines what we found that makes this model effective. We call these success factors.

Success factors

Level of knowledge within the church

Acknowledging this is with a relatively small sample size, the effectiveness of the employment seems to correlate pretty closely with the level of employment expertise within the church. The churches performing the best are those with more than one person with relevant expertise. The church which is struggling the most has very limited employment knowledge within the church.

Commitment and energy within the church

Because employing somebody properly takes a lot of time and effort, and because lay workers want the wider church to be actively engaged in the ministry area they are leading, the energy and commitment from the wider to the relevant ministry area makes a big difference. Where this is lacking, this can impact the effectiveness and the morale of the lay worker. The impression we got is that it works best when there is a genuine sense of partnership between the lay worker and the wider church. Things go less well when the lay worker feels that the church is merely outsourcing responsibility for a ministry area to them.

Personalities, relationships, and experience

Many participants said that the model is generally working, and often they attribute this to the people involved, the quality of relationship between the worker and others in the church (including the line manager), and the level of experience/competence of the worker. When a church has a gifted and motivated worker, and where the church is maintaining a 'good enough' system, things seem to work out pretty well.

It's interesting to note that the church where things are not working out so well (from the perspective of the lay worker and the leadership), that they had previously employed two lay workers and had not identified any problems. There hasn't been a significant change in the system, only in the employees. This suggests that a weak or insufficient system can be hidden by good relationships.

Additional support churches are drawing on

The following are the main places of support the churches were drawing on:

- The main external source of support churches are drawing from is their Synod. They have sought (and often received) help with areas such as template documents and policies (such as contracts and staff handbooks); drawing up a job description; mentoring and line management for the lay worker; ongoing support for those overseeing the employment; and access to training.
- The majority of these churches also have external help with payroll.
- A couple talked about using external employment-related websites, e.g. ACAS, DWP, .gov, etc.

Additional support these churches would appreciate from Synod/URC

The following are the main areas churches would appreciate more support in:

- Template documents e.g. contracts, staff handbook, policies, etc.
- HR/legal updates
- Access to an HR specialist as and when questions and issues arise
- Knowledge/assurance that they could get help from the Synod/denomination if things ever went wrong in the employment of a lay worker
- Guidelines for pay and pension contributions for lay workers
- Opportunity for lay workers to join the URC pension scheme
- Opportunities for specialist workers (e.g. pioneers, youth & children's workers) to learn from each other and find out about relevant training opportunities

- Some said it is helpful (or might be helpful) to get input from the Synod in the early stages of the process
- With funding being such a big issue, obviously every church would love to have money (or more money) from the Synod/denomination to be able to employ lay workers (though people recognise there is not infinite pot of money to draw from). Support with applying for grants would also be appreciated.

2.6 Summary/analysis of how this model appears to be working

Overall, this model seems to be working relatively well in the case studies we engaged with – especially for well-resourced churches, and where there is a good working relationship between the lay worker and the person/people responsible for line managing them. In order to employ well, churches benefit from support from the Synod, and all churches said they would like even more help (especially with HR updates and advice, and with relevant employment documents).

Local churches particularly like this model as they believe it gives them a greater degree of control and the ability to manage the worker, ensuring the worker remains focused on local mission and ministry needs.

The main limitations of this model are the amount of work that's involved for a local church, and there is a danger that even with an experienced team involved in the employment process, they may not be fully keeping up-to-date or following all the processes correctly.

2.7 Suggestions and recommendations for where this model might work best, and what could be done to strengthen and improve its use

Having listened carefully to what these five churches have told us; we suggest the following based on different church contexts:

For relatively well-resourced churches, where they have the energy, and employment/management expertise within the congregation or eldership, employing directly can be a good option. However, for this to be a sustainable option, to reduce the burden on local churches, and to ensure high standards of employment are maintained, we recommend increasing the support that is made available to local churches through Synods or the central denomination (as per the bullet-points in 2.5 'Additional support these churches would appreciate from Synod/URC').

The alternative model for these churches could be to employ lay workers through the Synod, but for the lay worker still to be viewed as the church's worker. If the church had assurance that they would maintain a high degree of control over the job role and day-to-day management of the lay worker, and if they were assured the worker would primarily be focused on ministry in their church and local area, they would likely be open to this model.

For less-well-resourced churches, participants universally agreed employment through the Synod would be the best option – though a couple of participants suggested they could explore employing a lay worker in partnership with other local churches.

For more senior level lay worker positions (e.g. church leader, consultative-type roles), direct employment through the church can work – but line management is best done by somebody in the Synod. And care should be taken to avoid conflicts-of-interest.

Section 3 – The Synod-Employed Model

3.1 Summary of the three case study sites

We interviewed three people from each of the three Synod-employed sites: the lay worker, the line manager, and then a representative of the church or the Synod, who is in some way involved, but may or may not have line management or supervisory responsibility.

One of the lay workers is supporting a church through a transition period; one is involved in community outreach, and the other is a specialist youth and children's worker. Two of these workers are connected with a single church, and one is working across multiple churches.

Two of these workers are full-time, the other is part-time. All are on limited-term assignments (one-year, four-year, and five-year). Geographically, these sites are based in the North, the East, and the South-East. In each case, the lay worker is the first in this particular role.

None of these workers had an existing connection with the church/churches they are now working with.

3.2 How this model works (including similarities and differences across the sites)

All three of the lay workers are employed and line managed directly by the Synod, and in each case the Synod was proactive in offering or placing the worker in their location (in consultation with the local church(es)).

In addition to line management within the Synod, one of these lay workers also has a layer of line management within the local church they serve. One of the elders takes a lead on this, though decisions made by all of the elders affect the work the lay worker does or does not do.

The roles and the sites are all quite different from each other. One is a long-standing URC church; one is relatively new and ecumenical; and the other site is a collection of URC and LEP churches.

As opposed to the church-employed lay workers, who all had an existing local connection, the three lay workers employed by Synod all came from outside of the area (two of whom had no previous experience of URC churches).

3.3 The benefits of the Synod employed model for the worker, the church, and the Synod

This section outlines what we found about the benefits of the Synod employed model for three stakeholders involved: the worker, the church, and the Synod.

For the Worker

Freedom and trust

All of the lay workers employed this way shared how they felt trusted by their respective Synod to do their job well, and to make decisions. There was no sense of those within the Synod trying to control or restrict the work they are doing. This sentiment also came through when speaking to those in Synods who are responsible for employing and line managing workers: they are very happy to let the worker

experiment and make decisions, so long as it's activity broadly in line with the aim of their role.

Support and perspective beyond the local church

Being connected in with the Synod opens up a number of potential benefits for the lay worker.

As well as being supported by the line manager, they have other opportunities to connect with other practitioners or people with specific knowledge and experience. There are also regular gatherings where they can learn from and be supported by others, e.g. staff meetings and training events.

Others in the Synod – especially the line manager – offer perspective from a different vantage point than a worker might get within one local church. For instance, a worker in the Synod is able to see the lay worker in context, e.g. if a particular church the lay worker is involved with isn't functioning well, the Synod-based line manager is able to support the lay worker with that in mind.

Being employed by the Synod can also help the lay worker if they have some kind of disagreement with a local church or are wanting to say or do things that might challenge the current mindset or practice of the local church. Workers appreciate having somebody outside of their immediate work situation to speak to, and to be supported by.

It's also worth noting that two of the three lay workers said the fact they are not employed directly by the church made it easier for them to do things the church might not necessarily agree with, and they also felt more able to say things to a church that might be difficult.

More robust employment

Generally speaking, Synods are better placed when it comes to effective recruitment and employment, and there is more knowledge within the system. They are more likely to have up-to-date knowledge of employers' responsibilities, and to have the relevant policies and processes in place.

From the interviews with the church-employed participants, and from what some of the Synod-employed participants said, it seems that Synod-employed lay workers generally have better terms of employment than the church-employed ones. There were indications that Synod-employed workers have a slightly higher pay rate, and higher employer's pension contributions. As cited above, when asked what they thought the benefits of being employed by the Synod were, one lay worker instantly replied, 'pension contributions!'

As with the church-employed lay workers, all of these Synod-employed lay workers are on limited-term contracts. However, within the time the worker is employed, there is more security, because if something doesn't work out at a particular church/location, the Synod would be able to deploy them elsewhere.

*For the Church***The contribution of a worker but with less responsibility**

As was made clear in section 2 of this report, employing a lay worker is a huge responsibility for a church – requiring time, energy, expertise, and a degree of risk. By having the Synod employ the worker, the demands of employment are greatly diminished, and the financial and legal risks for the local church are much lower. In all three of these case studies, none of these positions would exist were they not being set up and funded by the Synod. Therefore, churches are getting help and/or increasing their ministry capacity that otherwise would not be an option.

Fresh perspective

Because lay workers often bring a wealth of knowledge and experience with them, the church gets to benefit of this. And as explained above, because the relationship between the worker and the church is slightly different when the church is not employing the worker, this can make it easier for the worker to do and say things that might otherwise be more difficult.

It's important to note church-employed workers can also bring a fresh perspective to a church community, but this is perhaps truer for Synod-employed workers, as they are more likely to have no previous connection with the church, and the safety of being employed by the Synod can make it easier for them to bring new ideas. This dynamic is of course impacted by the level of openness of the church to experiment and change.

Knowledge and support from the Synod throughout the whole process

In the instance where a lay worker is being recruited to work specifically with one church, but is employed through the Synod, the church benefits from the expertise and support of the Synod at every stage of the employment process (e.g. helping the church think through how the work will fit with their overall vision and strategy; drawing up the job description and person specification; being part of the interview and selection process; helping set up contracts; providing line management; etc.).

Church still maintains agency

One of the main things churches appreciate about employing workers directly is more control, and ensures the worker is focused on local mission and ministry. One of their biggest fears is that employment through the Synod would mean less control, as well as a more diffused role for the worker.

The views of those involved at the two sites where the lay worker is focused on one specific church may help to assure churches that have these concerns. In both instances, the churches still described having a high degree of agency in how the lay worker used their time and what they focused on. The churches and the lay workers themselves reported how the lay worker has been very focused on the needs and ministry of the particular church/area where they have been assigned.

As noted above, and in Section 2, Synods are not looking to dictate what churches do – they want to work in partnership with them, and to allow the local church to have vision for and be invested in the work that is taking place.

For the Synod

A more strategic role for Synods

As made clear above, Synods do not want to dictate what churches do. However, in a spirit of partnership, where Synods employ lay workers directly, they have more involvement in thinking about what kind of support might be needed in which areas, and they can play a role in working out the right kind of people to recruit (in collaboration with local churches). Synods are also well placed to be able to identify churches/areas not only where a lay worker might be effective, but also where that worker could be best supported.

A more positive role for Synods

Some participants also shared how this model provides Synods with a more positive role. Rather than primarily acting as the compliance people who might say 'no', they pivot to a more positive role where they are more able to say 'yes'.

Also, the more that a Synod is involved in the employment of lay workers, the more they are connected to ministry and mission taking place in local churches/areas. Synod workers get encouraged by hearing good news stories and also grow in wisdom as they hear what workers are learning on the ground.

All of this is likely to create a healthier and more positive relationship between churches and synods.

Problems detected earlier and dealt with more quickly

A helpful point made by one Synod worker was that when something goes wrong in the employment of a lay worker, the Synod is often invited to get involved anyway (generally when things have got to a point where the problems are serious). By the Synod employing the worker, it's easier for them to get upstream, detecting issues (or potential issues) early, and taking steps to deal with them – rather than waiting for the situation to deteriorate. They can also ensure local churches follow best practice in these times, helping them avoid potential relational and even legal fallout.

3.4 The limitations of the Synod employed model for the worker, the church, and the Synod

This section outlines what we found about the limitations of the Synod employed model for three stakeholders involved: the worker, the church, and the Synod.

For the Worker

Weaknesses in line management

Just as participants from the church-employed sites described issues with line management, so too did those employed by Synods. While one of the participants described the line management they are currently receiving as the best they have ever had, the workers and the line managers at the other sites highlighted some weaknesses. It seems that most of these weaknesses arise as a result of the physical distance between the Synod-based line manager, and the context the lay worker is working in.

Because the Synod-based line manager is not based on-site, especially when working for just one church, some lay workers have a level of line management that takes place within the local church (as was the case for one of these participants). This

means the lay worker's experience of the employment, and their ability to operate optimally is still impacted by the quality of line management provided by the local church. Therefore, issues surrounding a lack of support and/or freedom can still occur, as with the church-employed model.

As noted above, Synod line managers (at least in this sample) are doing a brilliant job of trusting lay workers and giving them space to get on with the work in hand. The flipside of this, however, is that this can also mean a lack of support for lay workers. Some lay workers and their line managers admitted that sometimes key information hasn't been shared, and the lay worker would have perhaps appreciated more overt support and more regular contact.

Again, linked to the distance from the worker, line managers based within the Synod have less of an idea what lay workers are actually doing day-to-day, and are therefore not always able to offer specific feedback or advice that the lay worker might want or need.

As was sometimes the case within the church-employed model, there isn't always total clarity on which line manager/supervisor is responsible for what. Two of these lay workers have two line managers. In both cases, the lay workers and the line managers weren't able to clearly articulate exactly who was responsible for what. Thankfully, in these situations, relationships between all parties are generally positive, and the lay workers themselves are proactive in making sure they communicate with both line managers. However, with different relational dynamics or individuals, this lack of clarity could lead to problems.

Time-limited employment

In all three cases, these lay workers are on limited contracts. So, while they feel secure in their employment within the agreed contracted time, they have no assurance what will happen beyond that. This lack of long-term assurance can leave lay workers feeling insecure about their future, wondering what will happen to them at the end of a funding cycle.

It also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the work they are doing: if their contract is not renewed, what will happen to the projects they are working on, and the people they are working with?

Time-limited contracts are not uncommon for employees in other denominations. It might not be possible to change this reality within URC, but it is important to take into account how lay workers feel about them and their potential limitations.

For the Church

In all of these cases, were it not for the Synod employing and funding the role, none of these positions would exist. It's important to read the limitations for churches in light of that.

Potential misalignment between church and Synod

Generally speaking, these employment situations are working out well, and churches are generally positive about the employment. However, in all three instances, there were hints of at least some misalignment between the expectations of the church and of the Synod.

Despite the Synod's and the lay worker's best efforts to communicate clearly with churches, some churches had failed to grasp the nature of the work the lay worker would be involved in, and the way the relationship between the church and the lay worker would work (this was especially true in the case where the lay worker was working across multiple churches).

At another site, the church is totally happy with and grateful for the work the lay worker has been doing – but they did say before the lay worker arrived, they weren't entirely sure what the lay worker would be doing, and how the relationship would work.

At the other site, the church and the Synod had different views on exactly what the lay worker's role should be, and what their job title should be. The Synod allowed the church to make the final decision, but, in hindsight, both the Synod and the church representative think this probably wasn't the right decision.

Slightly less control for the church

As described in section 2, churches value being able to maintain control over who they employ, and what for. In these three cases, levels of control vary. Generally speaking, lay workers and Synods are very flexible, and they want to work in partnership with local churches. However, having the lay worker employed by the Synod can reduce the level of control a church has over the type of lay worker they get, and what the lay worker will focus on.

Possibility of less 'buy-in' from local churches

This point is essentially the inverse of what was described in section 2. Where churches haven't set up the employment, aren't contributing financially, and perhaps where the idea for employing the lay worker didn't come from them, there can be less buy-in from the wider church (even where the elders might be fully committed to the employment).

This highlights the importance of doing lots of groundwork with local churches (not just with the elders) before a lay worker is deployed.

For the Synod

Workload and responsibility

Obviously, the reduction in workload, responsibility, expense, and risk for the church means an increase in all of those for the Synod. Workers within the Synod are also often busy people, with numerous responsibilities. Communicating effectively with churches, providing effective line management, and keeping up with all of the administration of employing somebody takes a considerable amount of time and energy. Synod workers who are taking on these responsibilities do not find it easy.

Value not guaranteed

Synods that invest in lay workers want to see effective, fruitful, and long-term ministry result from the employment of lay workers. There are lots of variables that effect outcomes, with one of those variables being the role local churches play, not just in supporting the lay worker, but also joining in the work. Synods and lay workers can encourage this but not force it. The 'success' of these initiatives is still dependent on local church communities.

3.5 Success factors that impact the effectiveness of the Synod employed model, and additional support Synods are drawing upon

This section outlines what we found that makes this model effective. We call these success factors.

Success factors

The relationship between the Synod and the churches

At the two sites where the Synod-employed lay worker is working with a single church, the relationship between church and the Synod is positive. Those we interviewed highlighted this is being significant for how decisions get made, and how they can ensure good employment for the lay worker, and positive outcomes for the ministry of the church.

At the site where the lay worker was working alongside a number of churches, there is a lot of relationship building and communicating to be done between the Synod and the lay worker, and the various churches. The Synod and the lay worker recognise how important this is, and they are working hard to build these links. Again, where deeper trust, alignment, and connection is built, more effective ministry can take place within and through these churches. And where these relationships are weaker, it makes it harder for the lay worker and the church to collaborate.

The degree to which the lay worker is integrated into the Synod

At two of the sites, the lay worker seems to be well-integrated within the Synod: they have a strong relationship with line managers, and they are part of Synod meetings and events. At the other site, although the lay worker and the line manager have a good relationship, the lay worker hasn't been integrated into the life of the Synod.

They hadn't met many people within the Synod, didn't know what training or support was available to them, isn't clear on how certain processes work, and was not invited to Synod gatherings. This was a weakness acknowledged by both the lay worker and the line manager.

Wider awareness and support within the Synod

Synods cover large geographical areas, and there are all kinds of things going on within them. It's understandable, therefore, that beyond the line manager, the wider Synod might not know much about a lay worker, and the work they are involved in. In one of these cases, the line manager was on long-term leave and the lay worker, and the church representative said they had little or no support from the Synod during that time.

Therefore, it seems important that at least one or two other people with the Synod, who are not the lay worker's line manager, should have at least some awareness of the situation, and be able to step in if the line manager is away for any extended period of time.

Additional support Synods are drawing on

As with the church-employed model, to employ lay workers well, Synods are also drawing on additional support.

- Levels of HR knowledge and capacity appear to vary from Synod to Synod. The three synods involved in these case studies have relied on a combination of

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expertise and support from Church House and/or professional HR support services, in order to set up and maintain compliance with employment law and best practice. One Synod specifically mentioned using an HR app. There appears to be a certain amount of duplication taking place, which probably isn't necessary, given that employment law and best practice is consistent across the UK.

- At least one of these Synods uses an external payroll service.
- Depending on the job role, Synods may still be relying on local churches to provide some kind of supervision/line management for lay workers. This might be a feature, not a bug – but it is worth acknowledging that it is still a role for the local church to play.

3.6 Summary/analysis of how this model appears to be working

These case studies show that employing lay workers through the Synod can work well – creating roles that otherwise would not (and often could not) exist. Lay workers get the benefit of the support and wider perspective of the Synod, and quite possibly be better compensated for their work. In these cases, they all described situations where their Synod gives them freedom to use their initiative and experiment.

Churches benefit from an increased level of support from the Synod. Most significantly, churches take on less responsibility and risk than if they were to employ directly, while still benefiting from the insight and capacity a lay worker brings. This model has positive implications for Synods, giving them enhanced links to local ministry. It also makes it more possible for Synods to ensure workers are being employed well, and that all legal employment requirements are met.

This model is not without its limitations though. The distance between where the lay worker is based, and where the line manager is can make effective line management more challenging. Within this, lay workers might feel they are not adequately supported, and/or they need to have some level of supervision or line management at a local church level, the quality of which depends on the character and skill of that local person.

It can also be hard to find alignment between local churches and the Synod regarding what the worker should focus on, and how they should spend their time. And where churches don't invest time and money in a lay worker, they may not value or support them as much as if they had employed them directly.

This model also requires a lot of time, energy, and resource within the Synod.

3.7 Suggestions and recommendations for where the Synod employed model might work best, and how to strengthen it

For churches that lack the skills and capacity to employ directly, this model is almost certainly the best option. It enables such churches to benefit from the skills and capacity of a lay worker, without the responsibility of employing them.

For churches that do have the capacity to employ directly but still find employing lay workers is a drain on their energy and resources, employing through Synod could be a helpful option. However, there would need to be clear agreements between the church and the Synod regarding the focus of the role, how decisions about the lay worker get made, who takes responsibility for what, and how the line management of

the lay worker will operate. If local churches had assurances around the lay worker's level of connection and commitment to local ministry, and felt they had adequate decision-making powers, more would be open to this model of employment.

Recommendations to strengthen this model

The following are recommendations based on the research to strengthen the model. We recognise that CLR shared services workstream is already engaging with many of these recommendations.

1. Ensure a strong induction process for lay workers, which includes introductions to the people and systems of the Synod.
2. In cases where there is more than one line manager, clarify which manager is responsible for what. Also ensure there is a back-up plan if the Synod-based line manager needs to take extended time off.
3. Ensure Synod workers, who are responsible for setting up and overseeing employment and line management have enough time to focus on this aspect of their work. It takes a lot of time and energy.
4. Take time early in the process to build trust and alignment between the Synod and the local church/churches. This will help build stronger working relationships between the two and increase the likelihood that the employment will be successful.
5. Think long-term. Whether it is some kind of pioneering, community, or children & youth work, these things take time to develop – and Synods and churches want to see these being fruitful over the long-term. It's important to look ahead beyond the 3-5 years that a lay worker might be initially employed for. What is the plan beyond that?
6. Consider increasing HR capacity within the URC as a whole and make this available to Synods. This could include template documents and processes, such as contracts and handbooks. Synods would also benefit from having an HR expert they could speak to, ask questions of, and get advice. Presently, Synods are duplicating work and paying for support from different HR services.

Section 4 – Main Themes Across All Interviews

The previous two sections outlined the themes that emerged in relation to each specific model. Throughout the interviews, themes arose that related to both models, and to the employment of lay workers more generally. We summarise these here.

4.1 Line management

Clarity

Within both models, there were examples where there is more than one line manager, but there was a lack of clarity regarding the role each line manager does and does not play. Often, lay workers have more than one person officially line managing them, and they sometimes have other people they feel have some influence over their work, or to whom they are accountable (e.g. elders, management groups, etc.). In the interviews, lay workers and line managers weren't always able to clearly articulate who is responsible for what. Lay workers would benefit from greater clarity here.

Distance

In both models, participants want to have somebody local to line manage/supervise them and their work. At the same time, they expressed how it's helpful to have somebody outside the situation they can talk to regarding how they are doing, and challenges they are facing.

However, the two lay workers who are working at a more senior level within a local church both agreed their line management is best done at the Synod level. They did not think it was helpful or appropriate to have somebody in the congregation playing that role.

Training

In a number of cases, lay workers and their line managers articulated deficiencies in the strength of the line management that's currently happening. Sometimes line managers aren't offering strong enough accountability, support, and challenge. Others are perhaps not giving the worker enough freedom to make decisions and get on with the work.

Two Ministers, who provide line management, recognise that they had perhaps not been adequately trained for this aspect of their work, and that it wasn't primarily what they had gone into ordained ministry to do. We suggest more robust training, as well as ongoing support for line managers might be worth considering. Perhaps it's also worth asking in each situation if the Minister is the best placed person to line manage the lay worker, or if they actually are willing to take on this responsibility – especially in multi-church or complex pastorates.

Time and energy

All of the line managers agreed that managing well takes a lot of time and energy. With many other competing demands on their time, they don't always feel they are able to execute this function as well as they might.

4.2 Importance of clarity and 'buy-in' before the employment begins

When we asked participants what their advice would be regarding the employment of lay workers, almost all of them talked about the importance of clarity: what is the vision and mission of the church/churches, and how does this role help to fulfil that?

The fact so many of them talked about the importance of having this clarity highlights its significance. It also shows that most people know this. The challenge therefore is not in helping people to recognise this as something important, but to help them ensure they actually take the appropriate steps from the outset. Participants also talked about the importance of clarifying and agreeing processes early on.

Participants on both sides also talked about the potential danger of churches 'outsourcing' an area of ministry to a lay worker, rather than seeing the lay worker as somebody who would help to lead and facilitate the wider church to participate in that aspect of mission or ministry. While this is a danger for either model, based on the case studies within this report, this issue appears more likely in instances where the employment of the lay worker hasn't been instigated by the local church, and/or where the church has no active investment in the lay worker.

4.3 HR law and best practice

Employment law and best practice requires up-to-date knowledge that is both broad and deep. Whether the employer is the church or the Synod, ensuring correct processes and policies are in place and followed is not easy – especially as laws and best practice are continually evolving. Across the interviews, we observed a lot of duplication in work taking place, e.g. churches and Synods developing whole new documents from scratch, such as contracts and handbooks.

Participants within both models agreed that it would be helpful to have more support with HR. The main support they would value includes:

- Access to high quality template documents and policies
- Periodic updates on employment law and best practice
- An HR specialist they can talk to, as situations and questions arise.

4.4 Freedom, control, and support

A helpful aspect of the research process has been having conversations with people involved with both models, and with people at a local church and at a Synod level. Having listened carefully to all parties, there appears to be a gap between assumptions churches might make about Synods, and the reality of how Synods actually operate.

Something that really matters to local churches and their leaders is having the ability to discern what they think God is wanting them to do and then having the freedom to decide to fulfil that vision. If part of that plan involves employing a lay worker, they believe employing the worker directly gives them much more control over who that worker will be, and what that worker will do. The churches who employ directly suspect that if they were to employ a worker through the Synod, the Synod might set goals for the worker, which do not align with the goals of the church. They also think the worker will be less committed to the church and local area, and that the Synod would probably want the worker to be spread over a number of churches.

However, at the two Synod-employed sites where the worker is connected with just one church, the churches have not felt that the Synod have been over-directive about what the worker does, and the Synod have been happy for the worker to be connected with just one church.

Equally, in the examples where the church employs the worker directly, but the Synod is either part or whole-funding the role, the Synod have not been overly prescriptive regarding how the lay worker should use their time – they allow the church to make these decisions.

When we interviewed Synod workers, they expressed no desire to control the day-to-day activities of lay workers; they just want to make sure that the church has a clear vision, that the work of the lay worker fits within that vision, and that the lay worker is supported and employed to a high standard.

On the evidence of this research, Synods respect the decision-making power of local churches, and where it's appropriate, they are happy for a lay worker to work within just one church.

Where this reality can be highlighted and guaranteed, local churches would be more open to employing lay workers through the Synod.

4.5 Concerns about having sufficient support if things go wrong

Frequently in the interviews, when participants were talking about the model they were using and how it was going, they would often wonder out loud what would happen 'if it all goes wrong'.

Many of them say that things are currently going well, but some referred to historical examples where employment hadn't worked out, or they knew of other local churches where the employment had gone very badly.

What churches and lay workers want to be assured of, is that if there is a problem, there is somewhere they can turn to get help.

4.6 Good relationships can hide weaknesses in the system

From our perspective, it was heartening to see the warmth and depth of relationships between many of these lay workers and the churches and Synods they work in. It was also encouraging to see the level of commitment and competence within lay workers, so far as we could observe, and it was described by those who see their work. However, these positive relationships and competent workers can sometimes hide weaknesses in the employment arrangement.

For example, one lay worker described how they effectively have two line managers, but they are not sure which one is responsible for which aspects of their work. But because they get on well with both line managers, and because they are proactive, they say things always work out well and there haven't been any problems. This lay worker made it clear that the situation would probably not be working out so well if they were less proactive, and/or if they did not have such a good relationship with their two line managers.

At another site, the three participants described a less positive situation, where the employment is not working out so well. In this instance, the system had remained relatively stable over time – but the people involved (the line managers and the workers) had changed. Though the situation had been satisfactory in the past, that is not the case in the present. This suggests that the system was probably not robust

before, but this was not identified because of positive relationships between the lay workers and the line manager/church leadership.

4.7 Parity of remuneration, benefits, and stability of employment

As described in section 2, some involved in the church-employed model think that lay workers might not be paid as well as those employed by the Synod, and that they are likely to receive lower employers' pension contributions.

From the Synod-employed participants, one wondered if there would have been housing provision if they were employed by a local church, rather than by the Synod. Across both models, none of these workers had permanent, open-ended employment – they are all on time-limited contracts. While recognising this reduces long-term risk to churches and synods, it does create less stable employment for lay workers.

As above, time-limited contracts are not uncommon for employees in other denominations. It might not be possible to change this reality within URC, but it is important to know how lay workers feel about them and the limitations of this type of contract.

4.8 Recommendations based on overall themes

Based on these overall themes, Eido would offer the following recommendations:

1. In every employment situation, ensure that the lay worker and all involved in employing them, have clarity on who the line manager/managers is/are, and what the line manager(s) is and is not responsible for.
2. Where line managers are not based at the site where the lay worker conducts their main activities, ensure regular contact. Where appropriate, set up local line management/supervision, with clarity about who is responsible for what.
3. Strengthen training for anyone within the URC who has line management responsibilities (whether elders, Ministers, or Synod workers).
4. Ensure those with line management responsibilities are given sufficient time and space to exercise this function well.
5. Boost HR support for churches and Synods³
 - a. Access to high-quality template documents and policies
 - b. Periodic updates on employment law best practice
 - c. Increase access to HR specialists within the URC.
6. Communicate clearly to churches the benefits of employing lay workers through the Synod, making it clear the level of freedom and control they will maintain.
7. To the extent that it's possible, encourage churches to make best use of the knowledge and support within their Synod, as it relates to recruiting and employing lay workers.
8. To the extent that it's possible, encourage churches to invite the Synod to support them where problems with employment are beginning to arise, rather than waiting until they reach crisis point.
9. Be mindful that just because a situation seems to be going well, it doesn't mean that the system is robust. It's possible for good relationships to hide weaknesses in the system.
10. Produce remuneration and benefits guidelines for all parties within the URC, who may employ lay workers.

³ We are aware that this issue is currently being explored by the CLR shared services workstream.

Section 5 – Summary and conclusion

Based on the case studies included in this research, it appears that both the church-employed model and the Synod-employed model can work well – though context is important. Both models have their strengths and limitations, and both could be strengthened by implementing the recommendations in sections 2.7, 3.7, and 4.8.

Generally speaking, most participants did not have a strong ideological attachment to one model or the other, though participants from some churches did express a preference for employing lay workers directly. This was largely because they felt employing directly gave them a greater level of control and would mean the lay worker would be more committed to them and their local community. However, most said that if there was a clear agreement between the church and the Synod regarding the commitment of the lay worker, and how the lay worker would be managed, these participants were much more open to the possibility of employing through the Synod.

The church-employed model was working relatively well in most of these cases, though in one instance, participants acknowledged it wasn't working particularly well. This model can only really work where churches are well resourced. They need members or elders with the time, management skills, and knowledge to employ people well. They also need the financial resources, whether these come from within the church, Synod, external grants, or a combination of these.

All of the churches employing directly talked about how much work it was. They also have some risk concerns regarding what would happen if one or two key members or elders were no longer part of the church, and what would happen if something went wrong with the employment.

The main thing these churches would like are access to relevant employment documents and policies, easy access to an HR specialist, and to know that there will be support from the Synod/URC if things go wrong.

The Synod-employed model also seemed to be working well, though it is not without its challenges. The biggest being the challenge of the employer and line manager being based away from where the lay worker is day-to-day. However, a huge benefit of this model is the reduction in workload and risk for a local church, while still enjoying the benefit of having a lay worker.

A list of recommendations for strengthening this model can be found in section 3.7. The key issues to address are around how the lay worker can be most effectively line managed, and the communication and relationship between the Synod and local churches.

Regardless of the model, the seven themes outlined in sections 4.1-4.7 are critical to pay attention to for lay workers and/or those who employ and manage them. The CLR is already aware of and working on solutions for some of these, while others are new to this research.

We hope that making these findings available to churches and Synods will help them develop wisdom and awareness as they seek to offer good employment to lay workers in the process of strengthening and building local URC churches.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary table of factors to consider based on different church situations

The following table summarises sections 2.7 and 3.7 to enable Synods and local churches to quickly see what they should know or consider depending on some relevant factors identified in the research.

Situation	Church-employed model	Synod-employed model
Well-resourced church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capable of offering good employment ● Challenge of high workload for the church ● Challenge of keeping up to date with employment law and best practice ● Need to consider plan if one or two key elders were no longer part of the church ● Benefits from support from Synod 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capable of offering good employment ● Lowers workload for local church ● Can lower risk for local church ● Challenge of having line manager removed from lay worker's context ● Need to assure church of their agency and the commitment of the worker to that local church
Lower-resourced church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not recommended: unlikely church will be able to set up and manage effective employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Synod able to set up and help manage effective employment ● Church will still need to offer support to the lay worker and some level of supervision ● Important to establish alignment between the Synod and the church
Employing senior roles (e.g. church leader, change consultant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can work well as a model ● Best to have line management outside of the church ● Important to recognise possible power dynamics and avoid potential conflicts of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can help to mitigate potentially difficult dynamics and conflicts of interest ● Provides sense of support for the lay worker if they need to make difficult/unpopular decisions ● Important to agree and communicate expectations with the church

Appendix 2: Draft toolkit of resources Synods and churches may find helpful in employing lay workers well

Eido are not HR specialists and therefore the following list is not intended or able to be a legal or best practice tool kit for employment of lay workers. However, it may be a helpful list of the tools and specific support that churches and synods may value based on the evidence of this research.

1. Make available template forms, policies, documents etc. required for employing a lay worker e.g.
 - a. Employment contract
 - b. Employee handbook
 - c. Policies and processes (such as sickness, booking leave, grievances, etc.)
 - d. Holiday forms.
2. Enhanced training for line managers (whether church- or Synod-based).
3. Regular updates for Synods and churches outlining changes to employment law, and updates on best practice.
4. Access to an HR specialist for churches and Synods, to provide advice for all stages and possible occurrences of employment (e.g. recruitment, setting up the employment, managing the employment, disciplinary processes, ending/terminating employment, etc.).
5. Process of support for churches that they could get help from the Synod/denomination if things ever went wrong in the employment of a lay worker.
6. Role-specific guidelines for pay and pension contributions for lay workers.
7. Process for church-employed lay workers to join the URC pension scheme.
8. Processes for specialist workers (e.g. pioneers, youth & children's workers) to learn from each other and find out about relevant training opportunities.
9. Guidelines for churches and synods, to help them communicate well in the early stages of thinking about employing a lay worker.
10. Induction checklist for Synods and local churches for hiring church-based lay workers.
11. Templates for strategic or long-term thinking before employing a lay worker. If a lay worker is being employed on a three or even a five-year contract, what is the hope/plan beyond that time?
12. FAQs to communicate benefits to local churches of employing through Synod to provide reassurance regarding fears they might have.
13. Processes for a more 'joined up' option for providing payroll services. Currently different churches and synods are using a range of payroll services.

Paper A8

Employment of lay workers

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)	<p>Resolution 31 General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to the URC Trust in relation to the making of charitable grants out of the restricted Church Life Fund for lay worker roles, in line with the criteria set out in section four.</p> <p>Resolution 32 Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to publish relevant templates and application advice via the Resources Hub.</p> <p>Resolution 33 Assembly affirms the proposed distinction between lay work and ordained/commissioned ministry, and instructs Church Life Fund Committee to uphold this distinction and seek advice where necessary.</p> <p>Resolution 34 Assembly instructs that funding is only given when Church Life Fund Committee have confidence that the liability of individuals will be limited and all legal obligations will be met. Assembly reminds employers that they are personally responsible for ensuring they are compliant with all legal requirements when employing someone, and failure to comply can lead to serious legal consequences.</p> <p>Resolution 35 Assembly recommends that applicants for lay worker grants carefully consider the appropriate employing entity.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To propose a process through which the Church Life Fund will make grants for lay workers in local churches.
Main points	<p>Executive summary</p> <p>The paper sets a clear framework for Church Life Fund grants to employ lay workers in local churches to increase missional capacity – either directly (e.g., children/youth, regeneration) or by releasing capacity (e.g., administration). Funding is by grant only: CLF/URCT will not be the employer or assume vicarious liability. Applications must evidence a robust legal employer (ideally a synod trust/CIO/incorporated church), compliance with employment law and safer recruitment, appropriate insurance, line management and pastoral care, CPD, payment of at least the Real Living Wage, time-bound contracts, and provision for redundancy. Success measures are set at application, with proportionate annual reporting.</p> <p>A firm boundary is drawn between lay work and ordained/commissioned ministry (and CRCW competencies): funded roles must not replicate ministerial functions (e.g., presidency at sacraments, routine worship leading). Eligibility will be safeguarded by the CLF Committee, with support from Ministries and Accreditation.</p>
Previous relevant documents	This paper follows the report in Paper A7 Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 51)
Consultation has taken place with...	<p>CLR Steering Group and Sub-Committee</p> <p>Eido Research (and employees/line managers/employers in eight case study locations)</p> <p>Business Committee</p> <p>Resources Committee</p> <p>Mr Ed Morgan KC</p> <p>Various synod officers, staff, and trustees through informal visits and conversations</p> <p>Deputy General Secretary (Ministries)</p>

Summary of impact

Financial	Funding will be made available through the Church Life Fund (CLF). This funding will be made as grants.
External (eg ecumenical)	It is possible that some of the lay workers funded may be in ecumenical contexts. This should be considered by the synod and noted in the application, with reference to the possibility of part or match-funding from the ecumenical partner.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This paper follows Paper A7 and its accompanying Resolution, and should be read and understood alongside it. Paper A7 sets out evidence from eight case studies on church-employed and synod-employed models, and draws out recommendations in areas including line management, HR support, parity, and clarity of roles. This paper translates some of those findings into eligibility,

governance, and operating criteria for the Church Life Fund (CLF) grants made to support lay worker employment.

- 1.2. Lay worker roles will be eligible for funding from the CLF, as one of three funding streams (alongside shared services and new communities). Funds will be given on a grant basis. CLF, and by extension URC Trust (URCT), will not act as employer in any case. URCT does not assume vicarious liability for the posts it funds. Applications must therefore demonstrate a robust employing entity and compliance with employment law and best practice.
- 1.3. Applications will be reviewed by the Church Life Fund Committee (CLFC) with the support of the Deputy General Secretary (Ministries) and Accreditation Sub-Committee.

2. Purpose and scope of the grants

- 2.1. CLF grants for lay workers in local churches exist to increase missional capacity – either directly (e.g. a children and youth worker, a church regeneration worker) or indirectly (e.g. administrative support that frees Ministers, Elders, and other volunteers for specific missional work).
- 2.2. There is evidence from across the denomination of the vital role lay workers play in the life of the church. The hope is that the new lay worker roles will help lift some of the burden on local churches, freeing capacity for other work. Lay worker applications may also be paired with new community applications.
- 2.3. The grants will not be used to fund ordained or commissioned ministry, and applications for roles which too closely resemble ordained or commissioned ministry will not be eligible for funding from the CLF.
- 2.4. Any local church may apply for a lay worker, provided they have the support of their synod. As with all other applications to the CLF, applications should be passed through the relevant synod. Applications will be assessed on their individual merits.
- 2.5. Several synods have asked whether local church lay worker roles they are currently funding can or should be transferred to the Church Life Fund. This is not precluded, but may not be worthwhile if the current arrangement is working well. Existing roles which synods wish to transfer should be assessed jointly by CLFC and the relevant synod on a case-by-case basis, rather than as a binary policy.

3. Distinguishing lay work from ordained or commissioned ministry

- 3.1. The funding made available through the Church Life Fund will not be used to fund roles which, in practice, replicate the functions of an ordained or commissioned minister. To do so – without the accompanying theological education, ecclesial grounding, denominational oversight, and disciplinary structures – would be inappropriate. Presidency at the sacraments and regular leading of worship should not routinely fall within the remit of a CLF funded lay worker.
- 3.2. Roles funded through the Church Life Fund will not overlap significantly with the Marks of Ministry or Core Competencies of Church Related Community

Workers. While some of the roles may at times include elements of these, they should not, in combination, form a core part of the work. For example, the distinction between community workers and CRCWs is that lay workers will not simultaneously act as contextual theologians, missionary and evangelists, and ecclesially-rooted community development practitioners.

- 3.3. The Church Life Fund Committee will have a key role in safeguarding this distinction, ensuring that eligible lay worker roles are clearly differentiated from roles that too closely resemble ordained or commissioned ministry. In doing so, the Committee will need to draw on the expertise of the Deputy General Secretary (Ministries) and the Accreditation Sub-Committee (who will already be involved in reviewing new community applications). CLFC may also need to establish its own lay worker sub-committee to support them in making the distinction. CLFC members should also receive training at the outset of their term, to help them recognise some of the key questions they are likely to face.

4. Funding Criteria

- 4.1. To be eligible for funding from the Church Life Fund, lay worker applications:

- Must demonstrate missional benefit, either directly through the requested role, or by releasing capacity for project work which is detailed in the application.
- Must clearly outline how the employer will meet legal obligations and good practice (contracts, handbook, policies, safer recruitment, equality, etc).
- Must have considered and planned the appropriate employing entity (synod trust/missional partnership/local church) and insurance arrangements.
- Must have identified plans for line management and pastoral care.
- Must outline the financial position of the church, and if possible, make a tangible offer of funding towards the role. Redundancy costs must also be budgeted from the outset.
- Must commit to Continuing Professional Development for the lay worker.
- Must commit to pay at least the Real Living Wage.
- Must include a job pack, including a proposed job description, person specification, terms (salary, annual leave, pension), and contract length.
- Must demonstrate sympathy with the ethos of the URC and set out safeguarding expectations.

5. Employing entity, liability, and insurance

- 5.1. The CLF will not act as employer for any of the funded roles. In its role as grant-maker, URCT will not take on vicarious liability for lay workers funded through the CLF. The Committee must have confidence in the employment arrangement being proposed. If this confidence cannot be given, the role will be ineligible for funding.
- 5.2. In order to limit legal liability, the employer should ideally be established as a legal entity (synod trust/missional partnership CIO/incorporated church). If a church employs a lay worker as an unincorporated voluntary association (which it the legal default in an unincorporated church), the Elders' Meeting

assumes unlimited legal liability. This is a significant level of personal risk.

- 5.3. In some circumstances, churches wishing to employ lay workers will not be incorporated. Although ideally grants will be made to employers incorporated as legal entities, grants may be made to unincorporated local churches. In this case, synods must have undertaken necessary due diligence, exploring potential options for incorporation with churches who wish to employ a lay worker funded by the Church Life Fund.

Church Life Fund Committee will also seek to engage with synods proposing lay worker grants for unincorporated local churches, to explore potential incorporation. If grants are made to unincorporated local churches, steps must be taken to ensure liability is as limited as possible; this may be through indemnity insurance, for example.

- 5.4. As laid out at length in the Eido paper, there are essentially two primary options for local churches to employ a lay worker (plus a third, depending on context):
- A local church (ideally incorporated, or unincorporated) employs a lay worker directly
 - The relevant synod trust employs the lay worker on behalf of the local church
 - In some cases, for example North Western Synod, there is a third option, whereby a CIO, covering a group of local churches arranged as a Missional Partnership, acts as employer on behalf of a local church.
- 5.5. Law and Polity Reference Group are currently working on a standard constitution for local churches who wish to constitute as a CIO. This will be made available on the resources hub once it is complete, given that it is complementary to the Church Life Fund's grant-making operations.
- 5.6. The Church Life Review has previously sought, in conjunction with North Western Synod, counsel's opinion from Mr Ed Morgan KC. That advice has formed the basis of the approach taken in this paper, recognising the need to provide proper and secure legal protection for employers and employees alike.
- 5.7. As set out at length in Eido's report (Paper A7) both primary structural options have benefits and disbenefits. The Steering Group have given careful thought to this issue from the perspective of risk at the local level. The entire Church Life Review is focused on doing things collectively to better support and reduce the burden on local churches. Given this, the Steering Group encourages applicants for lay worker grants to carefully consider the appropriate structural option in conversation with their synod trust.
- 5.8. Applications must state who is insured, and how cover will operate when delivery occurs on local church premises.

6. Success measures and reporting

- 6.1. As with all work funded by the Church Life Fund, lay worker roles will need to be assessed in line with success criteria. There is a need to do this in a way

that is pastorally sensitive and legally compliant, to ensure safety for the worker, manager, and employer (and by extension, the church and synod).

- 6.2. Success criteria are set at application and must be proportionate to the role. They should include outputs (what is delivered), outcomes (difference made), and enablers (capacity released).
 - 6.3. Reporting should be annual and proportionate. CLFC will require brief line-manager and local church reports, a post-holder reflection, and a third-party view. At the end of the original contract term, synods should undertake a thorough review and provide CLF with the outcome regarding eligibility for ongoing funding. CLF will produce documentation to enable this process.
 - 6.4. The standard will be that CLFC agree funding for the duration of the contract. CLFC will however reserve the right to terminate funding mid-contract in exceptional circumstances and after all other processes have been exhausted, e.g. in the case of a significant legal issue.
- 7. Contracts, time-bounding, and redundancy costs**
- 7.1. Contracts should be time-bound with review/extension points clearly identified. Extension requests must be submitted well in advance of the end of the contract.
 - 7.2. Redundancy costs must be budgeted within the grant application from the outset, as CLF will not hold a reserve for redundancy.
- 8. Line management and support**
- 8.1. Applications must show how supervision will balance support and challenge, and the ways in which employed workers can access pastoral care. If a synod-based manager is proposed, there must be an element of local supervision.

Paper A9

New URC communities of discipleship and worship

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Myles Dunnett, CLR Programme Manager myles.dunnett@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 36 General Assembly receives the new communities proposal, and endorses the values and principles in part two.</p> <p>Resolution 37 General Assembly notes the best practice and opportunities in part three, and requests that any new communities established through a Church Life Fund grant follow these recommendations.</p> <p>Resolution 38 General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to adopt the application and review procedures outlined in part four.</p> <p>Resolution 39 General Assembly instructs Faith in Action Committee to update the Accreditation sub-committee's Terms of Reference to accommodate the proposed application and review model. Assembly requests that updated Terms of Reference are brought before Assembly in July 2026.</p> <p>Resolution 40 General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to URCT in relation to the making of charitable grants out of the restricted Church Life Fund for new communities of discipleship and worship, in line with the detail set out in this proposal.</p> <p>Resolution 41 General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to publish templates and advice for applicants on the Resources Hub.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To respond to Resolution 51a from General Assembly 2023 by setting out a permissive and intentional high-level blueprint for establishing new URC communities of discipleship.
Main points	<p>Executive Summary</p> <p>This paper proposes a framework for establishing and funding new URC communities of discipleship and worship through the Church Life Fund. Rooted in Resolution 51a (GA 2023) and extensive consultation, it sets out shared values and principles – Christ-centered, inclusive, adaptive, and mission-focused – to guide local initiatives. These new communities are not replacements for existing congregations but additional expressions of URC life, shaped by local context, ecumenical partnership, and a commitment to diversity, justice, and environmental responsibility.</p> <p>Best practice emphasises patient listening, team-based leadership, sustainable governance, and pastoral support. Applications will be made through synods, with clear criteria covering local need, safeguarding, inclusion, and accountability. Funding will be flexible (seed-funding to larger grants), with review processes balancing accountability and narrative storytelling to capture impact. The aim is to create a diverse portfolio of innovative, Spirit-led communities that extend the URC’s witness and strengthen its future mission.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper N1, General Assembly 2023 (Resolution 51a)
Consultation has taken place with...	<p>CLR New Communities Working Group CLR Steering Group Business Committee Resources Committee Attendees at the <i>Conversations at the Crossroads</i> consultation (January 2025) Worship, Faith, and Order Committee Youth Executive Green Apostles Special Category Ministers Those with an interest in better serving areas of poverty and deprivation Various, Assembly officers, staff, including the Deputy General Secretaries (Discipleship) and Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries.</p>

Summary of impact

Financial	<p>This proposal suggests that new community grants should be made as one of three funding streams within the Church Life Fund (along with shared services and lay worker grants). Potential financial impacts outside the Church Life Fund may include future manse capital costs, depending on how individual communities evolve.</p>
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External (eg ecumenical)	Some of the new communities may be ecumenical ventures. This opportunity is explored throughout the proposal.
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Part 1: Introduction

This proposal has been prepared by the CLR New Communities Working Group (NCWG) in response to Resolution 51a of General Assembly 2023. Resolution 51a was an integral part of a suite of resolutions passed in light of Report N1 from the Church Life Review (CLR) and should be understood in the context of that report and its accompanying resolutions.

This proposal therefore comprises part of a wider package of CLR activities across four workstreams, all of which are intended to be funded through the establishment of a Church Life Fund, overseen by a Church Life Fund Committee representative of all thirteen synods.

This paper builds on conversations that took place at the *Conversations at the Crossroads* consultation in January 2025, and is intended to function as a high-level blueprint for new URC communities of discipleship and worship (NCDW), resourced through the proposed shared fund, including guidance on funding decisions, applications, review, and on-the-ground development. This proposal is relevant to practitioners seeking to establish (and actively grow) new communities, synods supporting and overseeing applications to the fund, and those responsible for making funding decisions.

What follows is intended to be enabling, encouraging, and permissive, ensuring that those engaged in on-the-ground community building and development work have agency, whilst also ensuring that the new church communities are URC-shaped, fit within the Church's polity, and make good use of charitable funds.

The purpose of this proposal is not to produce an exhaustive list of every possible type of new church community, nor to identify a list of places where a new community might be possible, but to outline a philosophy, process, and practice for the establishment of those communities, and to outline some of the opportunities and options as a source of inspiration.

Importantly, these new communities are not intended to replace our existing communities. They should be viewed as an addition to the life of the denomination, which will hopefully lead to growth in the areas impacted. In some cases, the new communities may represent new growth from established roots; in others, they may become the inheritors of an existing congregation; elsewhere, they may be entirely new URC communities. Overall, the projects made possible through the Church Life Fund's new communities funding stream are intended to enrich and expand the URC's mosaic of church communities.

Local churches and synods intending to establish a new URC community of discipleship and worship are encouraged to use the following values and principles at the outset and in development. We intend to develop some simple system of registration for a number of purposes, including URC recognition, sharing stories for encouragement and affirmation, safeguarding, and accountability. This will be more fully worked out in phase 3 (the implementation phase). In the meantime, please email your Moderator, Synod Clerk, and faithinaction@urc.org.uk with your plans.

Finally, it is important to note that this document is a proposal and not the process. The process for applications and reviews will not be this lengthy or complex. For the grant application and review process, please see Part 4.

Defining Pioneering

From Ministries Committee Pioneering Paper, General Assembly 2025

As a denomination, the United Reformed Church needs to constantly remind itself that it is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world. Pioneering is a big part of God's mission to be a growing church for all people in all places. It is an opportunity for the URC to partner with others to pursue God's mission towards a more just and inclusive society.

Pioneers are people called by God. This is a vocation. Pioneers have a gift for seeing, for imagination, dreaming, inspired not just by what could be, but also by a sense of holy discontent at the way the church is fulfilling its mission and purpose. In particular, this call and gift are exercised among those not currently engaged in the church.

- Pioneers see differently – a possibility, an idea, a way that things could be better, or new, or different.
- Pioneers make something happen out of what they see.
- It's a gift, a call, a way of being in the world. They can't help it – it's who they are.
- Not everyone is a pioneer. But we need pioneers, because without them we'll just get stuck with the way things are.
- Pioneers make a way where there is no way.
- The world is broken in so many ways. But another world is possible.

This definition is included as a framing device because it sets out a hopeful and ambitious guide to the kind of Spirit-led vision needed to develop new communities. It is not suggested that pioneers are the only type of people who can establish a new community. A list of some of the other roles that might lead the way is included in Appendix One.

Note on Language

Some concerns have been expressed about language, particularly potential colonial implications of the word 'pioneer'; the NCWG is alive to these concerns. As a denomination, we are yet to collectively agree on an appropriate alternative which fully conveys the unique nature of the ministry.

Consultation

Extensive consultation took place at *Conversations at the Crossroads* in January 2025 with a wide variety of stakeholders, including mission enablers, training and development officers, children and youth workers, Special Category Ministers, Church Related Community Workers, ordained and lay pioneers, and others.

Members of the NCWG have subsequently consulted with or sought to incorporate the views of:

- Youth Executive
- Green Apostles
- Special Category Ministers
- Those with an interest in better serving areas of poverty and deprivation
- Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries
- Head of Community Engagement.

Due to very tight timelines, some consultations were held at short notice, and in some cases with small cohorts.

NCWG Members

This proposal has been prepared by members of the NCWG: Steve Faber (Convenor), Nicola Furley-Smith, Sarah Lane-Cawte, Lindsey Brown, Ruth Maxey, Muna Levan-Harris, and Myles Dunnett.

Ornella Mbula provided the group with support.

Part 2: Values and Principles

Values and Principles for New Communities of Discipleship and Worship

These values and principles build on the themes and outcomes identified by the facilitator at the *Conversations at the Crossroads* consultation.

Values – being

- Christ-centred, Christ-focused.
- Communities that uphold God's Kingdom.
- Intentional and proactive about worship, discipleship, and mission.
- Built on strong relationships and working in collaboration with a network of local communities and churches, synod, the wider church, and ecumenical partners (without being constrained by this).
- Built within community, nurturing wider leadership.
- Adaptive, and constantly open to change (physical and temporal flexibility).
- Open to responsive, organic growth and development.
- Committed to good and responsible stewardship.

Principles – doing

- Set out to become centres of evangelism, worship, and discipleship, to see personal and community transformation.
- Empower people and communities to discern, act, build on their strengths, and learn from their weaknesses.
- Inclusive of all generations, backgrounds, identities, and abilities.
- Based around worship that is creative, inclusive, and accessible.
- Make use of spaces which are creative, inclusive, and accessible.
- Use internal and external resources for growth.
- Conciliar in decision-making, in line with the URC's ecclesiology.
- Safe, supportive environments with safeguarding and wellbeing embedded at every level.
- Committed to good governance.
- Work towards recognition by General Assembly, as a Mission Project or local church of the URC, accepting that this may be an extended process.

Part 3: Best Practice and Opportunities

Appropriate governance is key:

- Sustainability and accountability must be considered before any new community is initiated.
- Necessary compliance needs to be considered (e.g. safeguarding, risk assessment, insurance, employment, lone working policy, etc.).

New communities shouldn't be rushed; appropriate time should be spent praying and listening before establishing and developing:

- At least to begin with, the focus will be on being rather than doing.
- A new community will be relevant and appropriate in its local context, following extensive listening.
- Developing a 'guest heart', learning to be a guest at other tables, receiving as much as giving.

Investment in team work is essential:

- People should not be sent out alone, the priority must be to grow a team and get as many people engaged as possible.
- "Individuals do not plant churches. Churches plant churches. The biblical and Reformed method of church planting requires more than one gifted person launching out on his own to start a new work."¹
- A new community might plan to recruit a small team of paid resource, preferably locally grown, from the beginning.
- Relying on volunteers will rarely be enough.
- Some sort of base will be necessary in the locality.

Association with a network for support, encouragement, and discernment is vital:

- A network of partnership with appropriate local people is recommended.
- Some Synods, such as West Midlands, are establishing a regional network.
- As the portfolio of new communities grows, the Newbigin Pioneering Hub national URC pioneer network will be a focus to create fellowship, share learning, and provide a forum for discussion, prayerful reflection, and collective discernment.
- There is a need for ongoing research, training, and developing new skills as part of discernment and development.
- New Christian communities work best when they are attached to a local church community (for local grounding, spiritual encouragement and feeding).
- There is a clear need for pastoral supervision for leaders (if it is not already in place).
- Successful communities set out clear intentions and evaluate progress against them over time.
- New communities should be open to adaptation and change as part of an ongoing prayerful process of discernment and listening.
- New communities should be time-limited and reviewed. This proposal goes on to outline a review process in Part 4.

It is also important to note that this sort of ministry can be unpredictable. Outcomes are not always those anticipated or expected; different paths are often discerned once the journey has begun.

New Christian Community Discernment Process

Appendix Three outlines several discernment processes from ecumenical partners, including the highly experienced Fresh Expressions movement and the Methodist Church. A potential URC version of those processes is included below; this is not intended to be prescriptive but is offered as a basis for further thought.

A potential URC non-sequential process might be:

pray – listen – love & serve – nourish – build

Pray continuously, intentionally, purposefully, alone and in pairs and groups.

Listen to everyone: God; neighbours; community groups; ecumenical partners; civic bodies; charity sector; Synod.

Love & serve: show radical welcome; provide food; meet people where they are; recognise brokenness; acknowledge injustice.

Nourish the new community with prayer, Bible study, creative worship, discipleship courses, and open discussion.

Build the community: find it a space and nurture potential leaders; put in safeguards and structures to help it flourish; meet regularly for local, consensus decision-making

Links to additional resources on best practice from external sources and ecumenical partners are included in Appendix Three.

Opportunities

Assembly Executive in February 2024 (Paper H2) agreed to establish thirteen stipendiary Pioneer Ministry posts – one per synod. Ministries Committee brought criteria for approving these posts to the July 2025 General Assembly (Paper H2, Resolution 27, as enacted). Synods are working on plans to identify how they might create suitable posts for these pioneer ministries, with some closer to making an application to the Accreditations Sub-Committee than others. Several of the possibilities are based in new housing developments, and some might be ecumenical ventures. A fuller picture of the opportunities linked to these posts may therefore be possible as conversations evolve.

A more general description of the opportunities is given in Appendix One, which lists some of the potential forms an NCDW may take, and some of the potential roles which may be needed to establish and sustain them. The Church Life Fund Committee should take an open-minded approach, encouraging diversity and innovation in the applications it receives.

Part 4: Applications, Funding Decisions, Review Mechanisms, and Resources

Application Process

Applications should clearly identify local need, explain what the new community aims to do, how much it will cost, who will be responsible for doing it, when it will be delivered, and why it is worth doing. The process of crafting an application should include active and creative engagement with a range of possibilities, including some of the options outlined in Appendix One and indicators listed in Appendix Two.

Proposals may originate from any council of the church, **but must be directed through the relevant synod**, in line with the governance framework for the Church Life Fund. Given wide variation between the synods, it will be the responsibility of each synod to decide which officers/staff/committees are involved in supporting and submitting applications to the Church Life Fund Committee.

The Church Life Fund Committee will take advice from the Accreditation Sub-Committee regarding the desirability and viability of each application, on the basis that the sub-committee has the relevant experience to make such a determination. Clear delineation of responsibility will need to be added to both bodies' Terms of Reference. It is expected that Church Life Fund Committee will remain the final financial governance check for any item funded from the Church Life Fund, including new communities.

Where possible, applications should be jointly prepared by those with on-the-ground knowledge and specialist synod staff/volunteers, e.g. Mission Enablers. In some cases, synods may advise applicants that the application is not appropriate for the Church Life Fund. It will be up to each synod to manage this process, including any decisions related to synod-level appeals.

Applications should be broken into the following sections:

- Technical information, 'new community plan'
- Discussion of the criteria
- Review mechanisms.

The suggested requirements for each of these are discussed under the following sub-headings.

1. Technical Information 'New Christian Community Plan'

Every application must include:

- Detailed location information
- Context
 - Existing churches within the locale
 - Opportunities for community engagement
 - Needs assessment
 - Ecumenical opportunities
- Purpose and aims
- Comprehensive costings
- (Initial) Timescale
- Physical space(s)
- Required ministry
- Required lay workers (where relevant)
- Activity plan
- Safeguarding plan
- Diversity and inclusion plan

- Environmental impact assessment and/or net zero plan
- Accountabilities with named individuals
- Risk assessment
- Governance arrangements
- Relevant synod staff members.

2. Criteria

The governance bodies responsible for advising/deciding which applications to fund will need to make their decisions in line with agreed criteria. Every application should therefore address these criteria. These criteria are of critical importance both to the application and decision-making process.

Criteria

The applications (proposals) sent to the Church Life Fund Committee:

1. Must be intentional efforts to establish a new community of worship and discipleship and must therefore meet the values and principles for new communities outlined above.
2. Must have the clear involvement and support of the synod.
3. Must be a new opportunity emerging from clearly articulated local need.
4. Must have considered relevant ecumenical partnerships (i.e. what ecumenical partners are already doing in the area).
5. Must clearly articulate a vision, address all the requested technical information through a new community plan, and include the required information related to mechanisms for review/success measurement.
6. Are expected to address environmental impact/net zero ambition from day one, including proximity and transport issues for those who will form the new community of worship and discipleship, “greening” buildings where they are under the new community’s control, plans to audit and reduce the carbon footprint of the community, how teaching and worship focused on environmental issues will be incorporated, and engagement with other (secular) bodies locally on environmental issues, such as local sustainability groups, etc. New communities should also be registered with Eco Church/Eco Congregation to be part of the start-up plan and demonstrate clear intention of gaining appropriate accreditation under these schemes.
7. Are expected to demonstrate engagement with the URC’s commitment to becoming an antiracist Church, with leaders who have already received anti-racism training, or who will do so within one year. New communities are expected to have a plan for anti-racism, including consideration of how anti-racism will be fostered throughout the whole community (not just in the leadership), and a commitment to developing a clear process for reporting and addressing occurrences which might be considered inadvertently or overtly racist. New communities should demonstrate an awareness of racial justice and commitment to anti-racism through the theology, imagery, and language used in teaching and in worship.
8. May be located within areas of ethnic diversity, with a plan to engage and develop a community reflective of the diversity of the area, and actively lift up leaders from

different ethnic backgrounds.

9. May, where desirable, direct funding for new communities to areas of poverty and deprivation (by reference to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, or other reliable sources, e.g. Church Urban Fund's look-up tool), and should aim to make a positive contribution to the life of the community.
10. Must satisfy any other criteria or policies set by the Church Life Fund Committee and any other General Assembly priorities as enacted.

Notes to the Criteria

- It is not suggested that all the criteria must be satisfied for a project to proceed. The Church Life Fund Committee will need to exercise discretion in discerning which of the desirable applications should proceed. Rather than functioning as a restrictive way to assess applications, the criteria should be used to guide and inform decision-making in a permissive way. An example of how this would be put into practice: if a choice had to be made between two equally desirable applications, with one proposing to establish a new community in an area of deprivation and the other not, priority would be given to the application which met the criterion relating to poverty and deprivation. If, however, there was a desirable application which met most of the other criteria, but not the one related to poverty and deprivation, this would not exclude the application from being approved for funding.
- The CLFC will have the discretion to advance applications that are exceptionally desirable, even in circumstances where some of the normal requirements are not fully met.

3. Mechanisms for Funding Review

The Church Life Fund Committee will have overall responsibility for reviewing the progress and outcomes of the new communities it decides to fund. As with the decision-making related to applications, the Church Life Fund Committee will take advice from the Accreditation Sub-Committee in relation to the review of funded communities. This will be structured with clear delineation of responsibilities in both bodies' Terms of Reference.

To enable this oversight process, a mechanism for review will need to be built into every project from the outset and should be one of three key parts of the application. As the new community begins to form, they will be required to corporately undertake a process to carry forward the review plan in their application and turn it into a robust living document, which will be frequently updated as the context changes. The Accreditation Sub-Committee and Church Life Fund Committee will review the document at agreed intervals as part of a review process.

As above in the 'new community plan' section, the living document should include several headings carried forward from the application, including:

- Vision
- Timeline
- Measurable aims tied to dates
- Budgeting and funding (with a pathway to an increased proportion of self-funding over time)
- Sustainability of leadership

- Safeguarding
- Diversity and inclusion.

The Church Life Fund Committee may wish to provide a standardised template which can be adapted as necessary.

Internal Review and Storytelling

As the third key element of the application process, which must also be taken forward into the living document, there must be an outline for periodic internal review and reporting against the stated aims. The purpose is to ensure accountability given the granting of charitable funds, without restricting the ability of new communities to adapt and evolve in response to emergent change, organic adaptation, and Spirit-inspired developments.

The aims should be context specific. Although it might be tempting for the Church Life Fund Committee to set global expectations in areas like the number of people involved by certain milestone dates, it is unlikely that this would adequately accommodate the reality that the growth of new communities can often be unpredictable. As a result, it is suggested that the review process should have a narrative, storytelling element. The formation of thriving communities is not a scientific pursuit and may look different in different places.

Communities must therefore commit to document and record the difference their work is making to the people they serve and the place they are located. A focus should be given both to historical achievements, current work, and the potential for further growth – sustained contact with the wider community is therefore essential.

The reporting should therefore consist of structured, technical elements, alongside storytelling about the community, and the impact it has had, is having, and might have in the future.

Measuring Success

As with other aspects of this work, quantifying success is always going to be contextual. The scope and depth of the project's reach, attendance at discipleship and worship events, deepening spirituality, growing a team, engagement in leadership teams, and succession planning may all play some part. The NCWG suggests that the Church Life Fund hold this lightly, proceeding with desirable applications according to the criteria, and evaluating each funded project against its own aims and objectives.

Synod Reviews

In addition to a formal review process for funding purposes, undertaken by the Accreditation Sub-Committee and the Church Life Fund Committee, the new communities must also be reviewed by the synod, as outlined in Part 3. The process for this review will be for the synod to decide. Generally speaking, the synod reviews should function as a 'critical friend' to encourage development, and as an expression of pastoral care for the NCDW. Each synod should decide the relevant officers and staff involved in the review from the outset of the project.

The Church Life Fund Committee will need to be confident that synods are fulfilling their role in reviewing the new communities. To facilitate this, each synod will need a named single point of contact, so that a feedback loop is created between synods and the Committee.

Resources

Existing Resource

In this context, existing resource refers to ordained/commissioned ministries, that is Ministers of Word and Sacraments (including SCM pioneer posts) and Church Related Community Workers, and the associated costs funded through the Mission and Ministry Fund (M&M), as well as lay ministries, which include Lay Pioneers, Worship Leaders, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, and Elders (including Elders in local leadership).

Decisions related to the deployment of ordained ministry are the reserve of the synods. The NCWG suggests that synods carefully consider the needs of new communities at the pre-application stage, before a formal application is made to the Church Life Fund Committee. There is clear synergy between the thirteen new pioneering posts being brought to General Assembly in July 2025 and the CLR NCDW funding stream.

It is important to note that the financial reality of the M&M fund places a constraint on what can realistically be achieved with existing resources, which are already significantly stretched. Each individual proposed new community should therefore be considered holistically by the synod, with particular attention paid to the project's expected impact, which should be evaluated over time, to assess the ways in which resource requirements develop.

New communities will also be able to access existing shared service provision from the Offices of General Assembly, as well as any new shared services brought into existence by the Church Life Review programme.

New Resource (CLR Shared Fund)

The Church Life Fund should provide funding to cover all costs which are additional to ordained ministry and manses.

Supporting Applications

The Church Life Fund Committee will need to give careful thought to the support offered to those crafting new community funding applications. Neither a top-down imposition, nor a fully bottom-up 'wait and see' approach is suggested. Instead, a hybrid approach is endorsed, whereby the Church Life Fund Committee, supported by the Accreditation Sub-Committee, actively identifies areas which may benefit from a new community and actively seeks to support applicants in crafting coherent applications.

This will mean drawing on expertise within the relevant synod. Potential support models include employing a paid consultant(s) or alternatively bringing together a volunteer network. Some synods will already have the expertise to support applications. Different elements of the application process may require different types of support – the 'new community plan' requirement is notably different from more narrative, storytelling-based elements. This is referred to as a priority for future consideration and action.

Questions have also been raised about the benefits of using AI in preparing funding applications. This question is referred for future and wider consideration, particularly in relation to ethics.

Additional Notes on Funding

- In cases where an application proposes to establish a formalised ecumenical arrangement, there is no expectation around the ecumenical partner's financial

contribution. It is suggested that in these cases, new communities use Churches Together in England's *Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission*. In Scotland and Wales, where this does not apply, new communities exploring ecumenical partnerships should contact Lindsey Brown, Evangelism and Ecumenical Officer.

- The funding made available by the Church Life Fund Committee will cover up to 100% of the stated costs in an application. No expectation for match-funding or part-funding from existing churches, synods, or external partners is formally stated. There must however be a tangible commitment (e.g. volunteer time, financial resource from a synod or existing congregation, etc) from those involved in establishing the new community, to ensure shared ownership and buy-in.

Part 5: Governance and Polity

If General Assembly agrees to establish a Church Life Fund (with its own Committee), part of its purpose will be to fund the establishment of new communities of discipleship and worship (NCDW). We anticipate that some, but not necessarily all, of these NCDW will in time go on to become accepted as local churches of the United Reformed Church. Experience elsewhere shows that some of these NCDW are likely to be useful experiments which do not go on to be received as local churches by the General Assembly, and we believe these should not be seen as “failures.”

We are at a point where we need to take appropriately managed risks and try new things, just as some of our congregations in our predecessor streams did consistently throughout their histories.

Nevertheless, whilst the people that we seek to draw to Christ and Christ’s Church may be reached in quite novel ways, it is important to note that the new communities funded through the Church Life Fund are expected to conform to the principles set out in the URC’s constitutional documents.

We do not believe that moving to become more proactive in establishing NCDW necessitates changes to the United Reformed Church constitutional documents. This does not mean, however, that there is no need to look at or change the Church’s structures – just that they are not prohibitive to the establishment of NCDW.

Some of the reasoning for this is explored more fully in GA 2023 Paper N4, which reflects on what the General Assembly has previously agreed about Mission Projects. NCDW can be established by local churches or by synods, or by either of these working in partnership ecumenically, and operate according to the local context and intent for the worshipping community.

The Structure of the United Reformed Church is clear and precise about the establishment required of a local church congregation of the denomination. Other documents from the United Reformed Church set out permissively additional considerations for ecumenical ventures. We do not see obligations in the Structure or elsewhere that would make the formation of NCDW unconstitutional, although there is guidance and wisdom from policies of the Assembly that helpfully frame what we would see as desirable, and in some instances, expected.

Governance structures can be very different in size for a large and a very small church or a newly established community of discipleship and worship. A local church of over 100 members would not function effectively with an eldership of three, whereas it would be nonsensical to expect a church with just ten members on the roll to have all ten as serving elders.

Similarly, some larger churches find that they can manage business more efficiently by having a Finance and Property Committee reporting to the Elders’ Meeting, whereas a smaller church can manage those important functions as part of the regular Elders’ agenda. Whilst the Functions of the councils of the Church are set out in the Structure, precisely how each council manages its work must fit the context.

Constitutionally, to be recognised as a Mission Project of the United Reformed Church, a management committee needs to be in place, and the “ownership” of the Mission Project belongs with the synod, even if much of the operational work is delegated to that

Management Committee. An intentional NCDW would not be expected to elect Elders, whereas for a local church to be accepted by Assembly as a congregation of the United Reformed Church, there would need to be an Elders' Meeting, as required by the Structure. The NCDW would not even, initially, be required to be constituted as a Mission Project, ready to be received and accepted by General Assembly as such. Governance for an NCDW should be contextual and developing.

We would not expect power to be vested in an individual, whether ordained or not. If one person is given the task of seeking to form an NCDW, we would expect one of their most urgent priorities to be in forming a leadership team. This might in time become the management committee of a Mission Project or even the Elders' Meeting. The conciliar ethos of the URC is something we would expect to be represented early in the life of this NCDW, whether the new community is being established as an ecumenical venture or not.

The leadership team, however constituted formally, will need to take responsibility for safeguarding practice and policy. In its earliest phase it may not be practical to comply fully with Good Practice 6, but all the principles of safeguarding must be in place and observed from the outset, and more complete and technical compliance will be expected to follow as soon as reasonably possible.

In agreeing an appropriate form of governance, consideration must be given as to how the NCDW will account for its charitable funds, how it will manage the health and safety of those forming the community, and who, if employment is being created to serve the NCDW, will be the legal employer, responsible for ensuring the regulations associated with employment are met.

The management of liabilities for insurance purposes will also need to be considered, and insurers will require a properly constituted body to be that which holds the insurance for the activities of the NCDW, whether as a local church or the synod.

Fundamentally, whilst the denomination must ensure the legal risks and moral obligations are properly managed, we do not want NCDW to be so overwhelmed with the burden of compliance matters that the focus is on creating and maintaining an institution. The purpose of the NCDW is about helping people to relate to God as worshippers and disciples, and for this to be a joyful encounter with each other and with our God. Structure and governance issues must be dealt with through enabling the purpose of the NCDW to be realised. The NCDW should flourish because of appropriate governance allowing the people to be disciple-making disciples, not petty bureaucrats.

Part 6: On-the-Ground – Costings, Intergenerationality, Training, Worship,

Evangelism, and Discipleship

Cost Thresholds and Scale of Ambition

In line with the approach to the CLR shared fund proposal, these costings follow a low, medium, high funding model. Dependent on the size of the eventual fund, a 'pick and choose' approach could be followed. These thresholds are based around real-life costings from on-the-ground communities.

It is not expected that the Church Life Fund will provide funding for ordained ministers, as this will continue to come from the M&M fund. Manse capital costs are also not expected to be funded through the Church Life Fund, on the basis that it will be impossible for the fund to be large enough to accommodate three workstreams, if one is also required to cover the costs of property.

Low – £5-15k

This category of funding would be appropriate as seed-funding for small new community projects. Although minimal in scale, this level of funding can lead to success, and would allow the development of a diverse portfolio of mission projects. Lower initial contributions minimise risk but leave the option for enhanced funding if the project takes off and requires additional resource. This level of funding is already used in the URC: West Midlands Synod makes initial small grants of £5,000 available for mission projects.

As a further example, Southern Synod deployed ministry with a brief to plant a new church in West Thamesmead in south-east London. This ecumenical venture resulted in the formation of West Thamesmead Community Church, which meets in a Primary School. The ministers (a husband and wife sharing the ministry post, who also had pastoral charge at other established URC congregations) were provided with a Manse, and an initial budget for the first year of a little over £13,000, to cover school hire, events, and programme costs (e.g. Messy Church).

Medium - £16-50k

This level of funding would make possible more substantial projects, particularly those requiring higher levels of seed-funding related to hire/rental of space and project costs. At the upper end of the bracket, there may be ample funding to cover the costs of a lay worker from the beginning. A selection of smaller and medium-sized projects would allow the development of a diverse and varied portfolio of new communities.

High - £50-100k

A project of this scale would represent a significant, higher risk outlay. A lay worker could be funded from the outset of this project. At this level of funding, the Church Life Fund should expect very clear reasoning for the requested level of outlay.

Very High - £100k+

This funding bracket is included for completeness, but it should be noted that this would be an exceptionally high contribution for a new community project and should only be undertaken if there is a very significant reason to contribute such a significant portion of the funds available to the Church Life Fund. It is not suggested that a project requesting this level of funding should be rejected automatically, but serious scrutiny should be given to the budget, with careful consideration of the risk profile and potential benefits.

Ongoing Funding

It will be the responsibility of the Church Life Fund Committee to decide whether to continue funding for a particular project based on the outcome of funding reviews. It should be noted that the process of developing new communities can be an extended one, taking several years. The Committee should be open to the possibility of ongoing funding where practical and desirable, whilst acknowledging that new communities should aim to increase the proportion of self-funding over time.

Scale of Ambition

The Church Life Fund will be of limited size; even at the high end, total expenditure is unlikely to be higher than £4m per annum. This means that there is a cap on what can realistically be achieved. Assuming a medium-sized fund at the apportionment outlined in the impact model, which states that shared services and other core costs account for £500k across all modelling scenarios, this would equate to £1m per annum available for new communities funding.

At the extremes, this would be around 70 very small projects, 20 medium projects, or 10 large projects, or a combination of these. Although this level of work is far from insignificant, it is important to note that what is realistically achievable is largely dependent on the amount of money available to grant.

Likewise, the scale of ambition will also be dependent on the number and nature of applications received by the funding body. Decisions about the frequency of Church Life Fund Committee meetings will be dependent on the nature of allocation.

Further thought should be given to how the Church Life Fund might take a hybrid approach to generating applications, that is neither entirely dependent on local action, nor a top-down imposition of new communities. A fruitful approach might be identification of areas which might benefit from a new community, and active support with preparing a grassroots application. The NCWG invites the CLR Steering Group to give further thought to this question.

Indicative Funding Items

Given the above information, the following list is intended to illustrate *some* of the things which would be eligible for funding from the Church Life Fund. This list is included as an indication, but the possibilities are significantly more extensive.

- Start-up costs for new communities (e.g. publicity, materials, hospitality)
- Venue hire and equipment for community-based gatherings or outreach
- Project/programme costs for initiatives such as Messy Church, café church, or intergenerational events
- Employment costs for lay workers supporting the new community
- Support for hybrid or digital church initiatives, including technology and platform costs
- Costs associated with forming new expressions of church in housing developments, or community hubs
- Partnership-based projects with ecumenical bodies
- Costs associated with innovative outreach models such as mobile or pop-up church initiatives.

Intergenerationality

The NCWG consulted with Youth Executive twice, seeking to understand what representatives of URC Youth most value about their church community and what they

want to see from new URC communities.

Cultural Considerations

- Radical inclusivity is essential – communities must be accepting, adaptable, and safe, especially for those with past negative experiences.
- Authenticity matters – values must be lived, not just stated.
- Belonging is of equal importance to worship – communities must be open and welcoming.
- Intergenerational inclusion is critical – youth inclusion should not be tokenistic.
- New communities must be grounded in faith, mission, and inclusion.

Worship

- Worship must be high quality, welcoming, and varied – traditional, contemporary, reflective, or experimental formats are welcome.
- Flexible timing (e.g. midweek or evening services) and spaces increase accessibility for children and young people.
- Online (like YourChurch) and informal options are valued for reach and flexibility.

Summary

To properly serve the needs of our children and young people, and proactively reach out to new children and young people, new URC communities should prioritise inclusive belonging, practical discipleship, flexible worship, real-world mission, and accessibility in their worship and spaces. Young people seek spaces that are open, engaging, and responsive – where faith is lived and shared in meaningful ways.

Worship, Evangelism, Mission, and Discipleship

This proposal has emerged from General Assembly 2023 Resolution 51a, to explore the development of new URC communities of worship and discipleship. The goal is to have encounters with God in new places and with new people, and to initiate or join in with Kingdom-centred community building. This paper is intended to provide a framework of values and principles for grant applications and practical support for local pioneering work.

While each new community will be contextual and local, projects can be supported at every stage, from first ideas to development, by synod and Church House mission and discipleship teams. There is a wide and ever-growing range of resources available to assist with the development of worship, evangelism, mission, and discipleship.

The NCWG note that this proposal is not, and should not be viewed as, a blueprint to develop a set of isomorphic church communities. Instead, values and principles, along with best practice and contextual learning, have been outlined, which will help inform the new communities' unique expression of our shared faith through worship, evangelism, and discipleship.

Observations on Discipleship Development

- Interactive, discussion-based learning is key
- House groups and informal settings support faith development
- Spaces must affirm neurodiverse engagement and allow safe questioning
- Exposure to diverse theological voices is enriching.

Observations on Missional Commitments

- Visible community engagement, service, and social justice work are essential

- Eco-friendly buildings support mission and engagement
- Everyone should be equipped to contribute and lead now, not later
- Training and leadership development must be accessible to all.

Training for Practitioners

Those involved in establishing new communities will have training opportunities made available through the Newbigin Pioneering Hub. Although the Hub currently only trains lay people, there is potential for the offering to be expanded to accommodate top-up pioneering training for ordained ministries. A comprehensive proposal from Seedbeds/Newbigin Pioneering Hub is under active consideration.

Ministers wishing to undertake pioneering ministry will also be able to access relevant training through their EM2/3 budgets. Courses and resources will be highlighted by TDOs and the RCLs.

The role of a CRCW will not normally be appropriate to these communities, but there may be rare occasions when a CRCW would be the 'best fit'. The NCWG does not wish to be proscriptive, but allow for contextual flexibility.

Note on Church Community Life Cycles

One of the repeated observations at the *Conversations at the Crossroads* conference concerned the cycles of church life: midwifing (formation of a new community), nurturing (leading through a phase of growth), sustaining (pastoral care of a developed community), and hospice (faithful shepherding of a community at the end of its journey).

Two critical points emerge from this. Firstly, there are distinct phases in the life of a church community, with different calls on its leaders and members. Secondly, it should not necessarily be an aim for a particular new community to go on indefinitely – it can be healthy for a community to emerge, grow, flourish, and end well. The NCWG invites the Church Life Fund Committee to hold this observation as they undertake their work.

Note on Furthering General Assembly Priorities

It is essential that where possible new communities proactively further priorities General Assembly has set out for the church. The criteria listed in Part 4 provide a framework which will help funds dispensed by the Church Life Fund to be used in ways which further the URC's missional priorities. General Assembly has recently (over several Assemblies) passed Resolutions which commit the Church missionally to racial justice, poverty, climate crisis, and ecumenism. As Assembly adopts new Resolutions relating to additional missional priorities, these will need to be considered for inclusion in the new communities criteria by the Church Life Fund Committee.

Appendix One: Opportunities

These examples are intended to inspire imagination, creativity, and active discernment of the urgings of the Spirit. NCDW might be:

- New communities on housing estates
- Church at the margins
- Online and digital churches
- Micro churches
- Fresh Expressions, including messy, muddy, forest, cafe, dinner church
- Churches without buildings/walls
- Missional communities
- Satellite/campus initiatives
- Church plants
- Replanting
- Recovery churches
- Social action and community organising expressions
- Church for those physically distant from the URC
- Churches for diaspora, immigrant, and refugee communities
- LGBTQIA+ affirming spaces
- Coffee and retail shop expressions (*with a clear worship / discipling element*)
- Social enterprise churches
- New monastic and pilgrimage communities
- Spiritual wellbeing, health, and exercise communities
- Coaching circles / circles of presence
- new growth from old roots
- Something else entirely!

Those leading them might be:

pioneers – pilgrims – storytellers – missionaries – listeners – advocates – apostles – community ministers – nomads – edge ministers – town ministers – witnesses – pilgrim witnesses – minister friends – friends – nexus ministers – accompaniers – companions – special category ministers – ministers of presence – catalysts for change – missionaries

Inspiration can be taken from existing new URC communities of worship and discipleship, including:

- West Thamesmead Community Church (LEP), Southern
- Cambridge Solidarity Hub, Eastern
- Loves Farm Church (LEP), Eastern
- Church Without Walls (LEP), East Midlands
- Wooler Warm Welcome, Northern (Community Projects Awards winner)
- Contemporary Spirituality, Northwestern
- Birchwood Minister, Mersey

Appendix Two: Church of England Research

A major Church of England research project recently identified a few key ingredients which are common among growing churches:

- Churches that have a clear mission and purpose
- Church leaders and congregations who are intentional about and prioritise growth
- Clergy and worshippers who are willing to change and adapt
- Churches where lay people as well as ordained clergy are active in leadership and other roles
- Churches that actively engage children and young people
- Churches with a welcoming culture who build ongoing relationships with people
- Churches that nurture disciples (offering specific encouragement through courses & activities)
- Clergy/leaders who innovate, envision, and motivate people.

It should be noted that these are indicators and not criteria. Successful applications would helpfully refer to some of these indicators, where appropriate, to evidence that they are being addressed.

Appendix Three: External Resources

The NCWG have identified an array of practical external resources which may be of use:

- FEx compass and map (see below), and lots of resources: Where do I start? - Fresh Expressions
- Godsend: a toolkit for new Christian communities. Book and app: <https://godforall.org.uk/northern-mission-centre/godsend-app/>
- The Methodist Church, New Places for New People resources: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/evangelism-growth/new-places-for-new-people/>
- The Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) report: Mosaic Church and Tussenstand pionieren: Tussenstand pionieren- Engels (1).pdf
- Churches Together in England's A Flexible Framework, and Toolkit. Discussion points and a checklist for developing a project in partnership with others: A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission – Churches Together in England.
- The Church of England's Diocese of Chelmsford (Essex and East London) has put together a resource for discernment, *Travelling Well Together*: <https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/about-us/travelling-well-together/>
- The Church Urban Fund has a look-up tool to explore poverty data for your area: <https://cuf.org.uk/lookup-tool> Other community transformation resources can be found on the website.

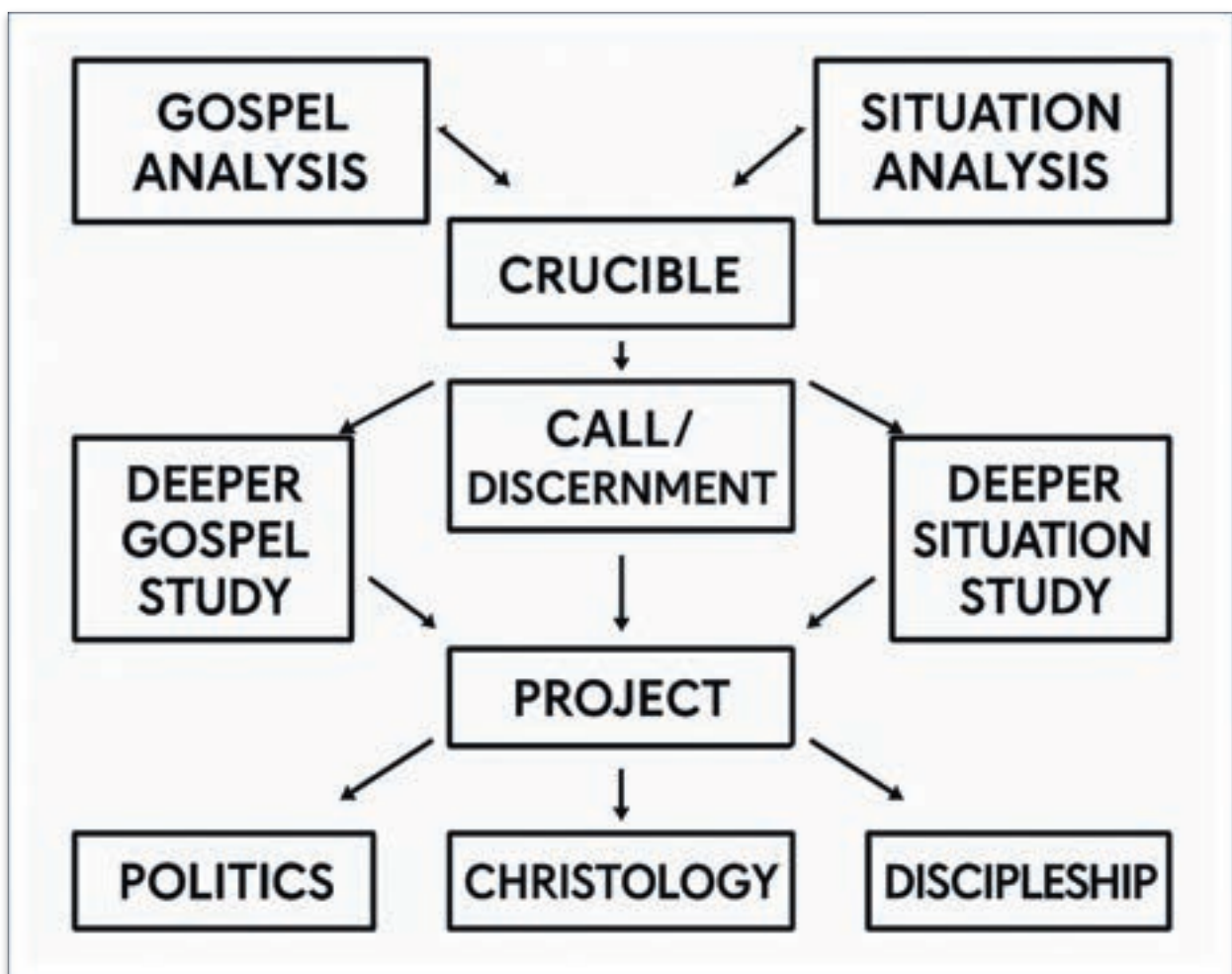
The FEx (Fresh Expressions) Map:



The Methodist Church process:



One of John Vincent’s models (of many) from Christ in the City (Urban Theology Union):



Reformed Church of America: discern – prepare – grow

***Discern** = pray, evaluate, assess.*

***Prepare** = find partners; get training; organise oversight.*

***Grow** = gather regularly*

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)	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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</p>

	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
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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	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
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.

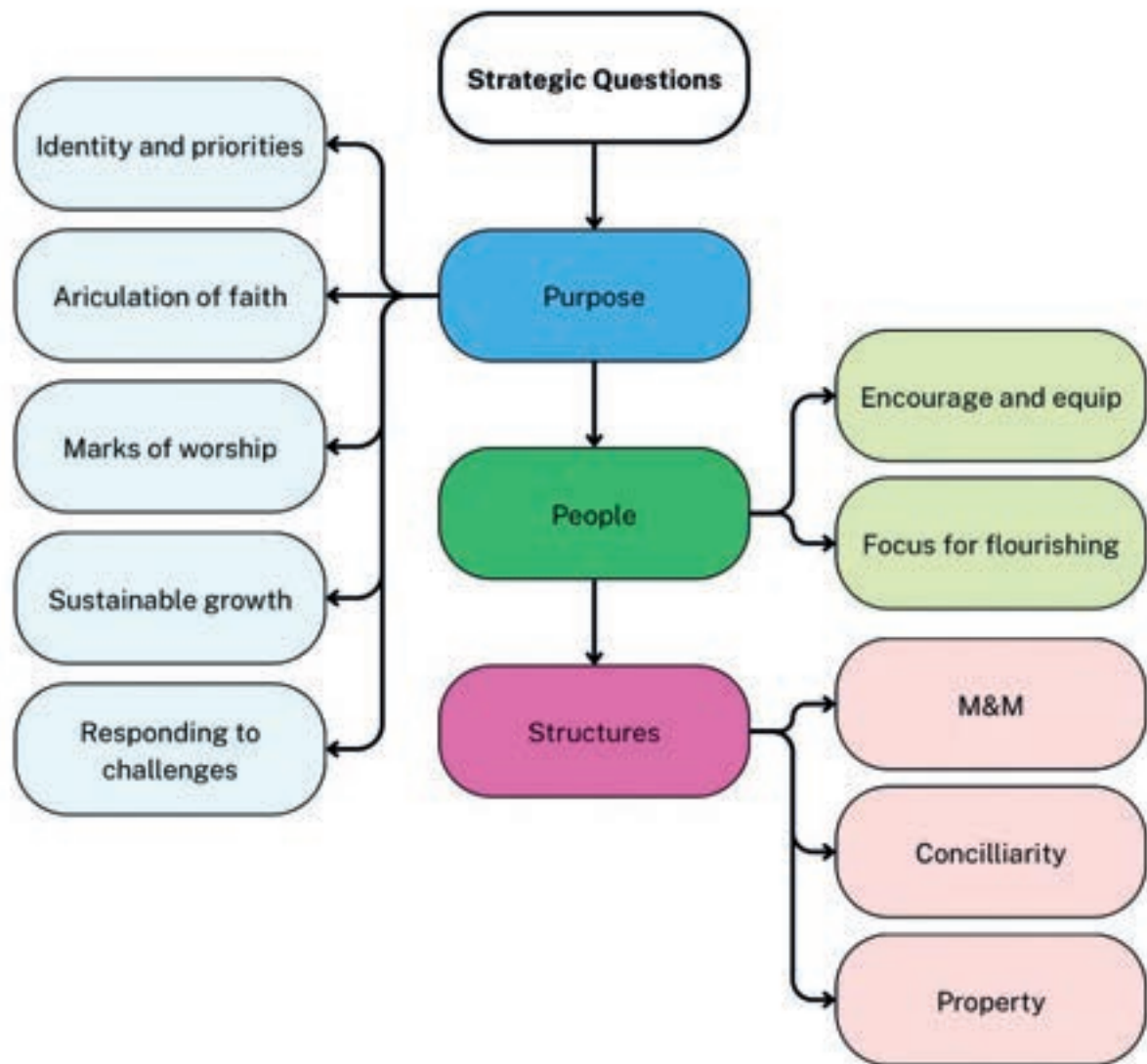
4. The future of the URC

- 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.

Resolutions

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.

Resolution 5

General Assembly endorses the proposal to establish a Church Life Fund (CLF) and invites the URC Trust (URCT) to make necessary arrangements to implement the fund. Assembly directs relevant URC staff to support this process as required.

Resolution 6

Assembly instructs Business Committee to initiate a review of the Church Life Fund after three years of operation, with outputs brought before Assembly in 2029 or later.

Resolution 7

General Assembly invites synods, trusts, and others to make contributions to URCT to create a fund known as the Church Life Fund. It is proposed that any such funds will be donated by synods, trusts, and others and received by URCT on the following terms:

- The donations will form a restricted fund known as the Church Life Fund whose purposes will be funding new shared services and making grants for lay workers in local churches and new communities of discipleship and worship.
- If the Church Life Fund shall be dissolved at any time in the future any remaining funds after settlement of all liabilities will be returned to the synods, trusts, and other contributors in the proportions to which they contributed to the Church Life Fund.

Resolutions

Resolution 8

General Assembly resolves that a Church Life Fund Committee is established, with a representative from every synod. URCT is invited to take advice from the Committee on the expenditure of the Church Life Fund and on request the Committee is authorised to provide such advice.

Resolution 9

General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to publish criteria, which synods should use to make judgements about which applications to send to the Church Life Fund.

Resolution 10

General Assembly notes the draft Terms of Reference laid out in Appendix Three, and instructs that relevant committees undertake the necessary work and bring back final Terms of Reference and proposed members to Assembly/Assembly Executive in 2026.

Resolution 11

General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to make arrangements so that local churches and individuals can also contribute to the Church Life Fund. Assembly recommends that the Committee explores options for grants from external funding bodies.

Resolution 12

General Assembly resolves that the URC shared resource hub will be known as *myURC* and instructs Resources Committee and relevant staff to implement the URC shared resource hub, as soon as feasible.

Resolution 13

Assembly resolves to establish a myURC helpdesk to receive and respond to emails, chat, and phone calls from myURC users, and instructs Resources Committee to implement the helpdesk as soon as feasible.

Resolution 14a

Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to URCT in relation to providing funding out of the restricted Church Life Fund for the operation of the myURC shared resources hub and helpdesk.

Resolution 14b

Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to review the operation of myURC and the helpdesk annually.

Resolution 14c

Assembly instructs Resources Committee to ensure sufficient staffing for the myURC helpdesk at its inception, and to monitor and review staffing levels to ensure effective staffing levels are maintained.

Resolution 15

Assembly affirms the proposed myURC hub and helpdesk, governance model, and apportions operational governance responsibility to Resources Committee, with PLATO to contribute on questions of content.

Resolution 16

Assembly instructs Resources and Church Life Fund Committees, along with relevant United Reformed Church (URC) staff, to establish an accounting support service,

consisting of support for churches who can prepare their own accounts, and support for those who cannot.

Resolution 17

Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to the URC Trust (URCT) in relation to providing funding out of the restricted Church Life Fund for an accounting support service.

Resolution 18

Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to review the accounting service annually.

Resolution 19

Assembly invites synods to apply to the Church Life Fund to request direct accounting support on behalf of select local churches, in cases where the church could not otherwise manage their accounts. To enable this, Assembly advises that synods maintain a list of those churches who struggle with their accounts, and refer those that require additional support after training and confidence building activities.

Resolution 20a

Assembly extends thanks to Small Charity Support for their willingness to support the denomination, and gratefully accepts the offer of support.

Resolution 20b

Assembly instructs Resources Committee to liaise with Small Charity Support, to find ways of working together to establish an accounting Adult Learning Model for the denomination.

Resolution 21

Assembly advises that the URC should actively incorporate more systematic procurement approaches and improved resources in the future.

Resolution 22

Assembly instructs Resources Committee to undertake work to further investigate, cost, and propose a preferred procurement model to be adopted by the URC.

Resolution 23

General Assembly affirms that, wherever possible, the provision of support services for local churches, provided by synods and General Assembly, is best done in a coordinated and joined up fashion. Assembly encourages the whole church to develop a culture in which we develop resources collectively for the benefit of the whole church, whilst engaging within synods and locally to ensure those resources actively support local congregational life.

Resolution 24

General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with developing an IT infrastructure that has the potential to serve the General Assembly and the Synods.

Resolution 25

General Assembly encourages synods to, when possible, move their IT infrastructure provision to that which has been developed for the whole church.

Resolutions

Resolution 26a

General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with bringing together key stakeholders together, to devise a means by which each local church has access to professional HR advice, at a minimum in the form of a helpline.

Resolution 26b

General Assembly encourages synods to work constructively and generously with the Resources Committee in working towards HR provision available to each local congregation within the United Reformed Church.

Resolution 27a

General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with developing a model of payroll services that can be made available to each synod and local church.

Resolution 27b

General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with consulting widely with synods and the members of the Church Life Fund Committee to arrive at a workable, affordable funding model for a shared payroll provision.

Resolution 28

General Assembly tasks the Resources Committee with hosting a consultation with a wide range of stakeholders from synods, General Assembly and the Retired Ministers' Housing Society to explore issues surrounding the existing, and possible future, arrangements for supporting the maintenance and development of buildings held in trust for United Reformed Church purposes.

Resolution 29

Assembly instructs Resources Committee to prioritise this work, starting with more easily attainable shared services, like payroll and HR.

Resolution 30

General Assembly receives the findings of the Eido report, and notes and endorses the model and toolkit outlined in the appendices.

Resolution 31

General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to the URC Trust in relation to the making of charitable grants out of the restricted Church Life Fund for lay worker roles, in line with the criteria set out in section four.

Resolution 32

Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to publish relevant templates and application advice via the Resources Hub.

Resolution 33

Assembly affirms the proposed distinction between lay work and ordained/commissioned ministry, and instructs Church Life Fund Committee to uphold this distinction and seek advice where necessary.

Resolution 34

Assembly instructs that funding is only given when Church Life Fund Committee have confidence that the liability of individuals will be limited and all legal obligations will be met. Assembly reminds employers that they are personally responsible for ensuring they are compliant with all legal requirements when employing someone, and failure to comply can lead to serious legal consequences.

Resolution 35

Assembly recommends that applicants for lay worker grants carefully consider the appropriate employing entity.

Resolution 36

General Assembly receives the new communities proposal, and endorses the values and principles in part two.

Resolution 37

General Assembly notes the best practice and opportunities in part three, and requests that any new communities established through a Church Life Fund grant follow these recommendations.

Resolution 38

General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to adopt the application and review procedures outlined in part four.

Resolution 39

General Assembly instructs Faith in Action Committee to update the Accreditation sub-committee's Terms of Reference to accommodate the proposed application and review model. Assembly requests that updated Terms of Reference are brought before Assembly in July 2026.

Resolution 40

General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to give advice to URCT in relation to the making of charitable grants out of the restricted Church Life Fund for new communities of discipleship and worship, in line with the detail set out in this proposal.

Resolution 41

General Assembly instructs Church Life Fund Committee to publish templates and advice for applicants on the Resources Hub.

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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