

Senior Leadership Team Report

Senior Leadership Team

Basic information

Contact name and email address	John Bradbury, General Secretary john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To update the Assembly on the work of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the current and emerging agenda for work emerging from the General Assembly.
Main points	
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	No specific financial impact, but we note that there are major pieces of strategic work that the Assembly has sought or is seeking which at the moment have no identified funding to support them.
External (eg ecumenical)	Where possible we will seek ecumenical partners for the future work strands identified within this paper.

Plant gardens...

Our life together as the United Reformed Church has been significantly shaped by horticultural images in the last while. Jeremiah's image of planting gardens in exile was the text which attached itself to the Church Life Review process. An early part in that process had us reflecting on the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, whose roots were dug around and fertilizer applied, to give it a new chance of life.

The parable of the mustard seed – and the giant chaotic bush that can emerge from a tiny beginning is attaching itself to the M&M review process. Alongside these images, we have also had to face the difficult but necessary work of pruning: cutting back, not for its own sake, but so that future life may be possible.

This has been a demanding season in the life of the Church, but also one in which God may be inviting us to renewed faithfulness. There have been elements of all of this embodied within the life of the Church in the last while.

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We became the 'Senior Leadership Team' last year, and the four members, John, Jenny, Nicola and Victoria became the settled form of the team after last year's General Assembly after a period of rapid turnover within what had been the General Secretariat – there were seven iterations of the General Secretariat in 6 years as far as we can count.

Other people are often in attendance to better support our work, particularly Myles Dunnett as he tends the ongoing Church Life implementation work. In a number of quarters, we've actively reflected on what leadership means in a conciliar church, where foundationally, we discern together the direction we need to take and the shapes we need to be.

Leadership

Leadership in that context is very much about enabling the Councils of the Church in their work, hopefully inspiring, bringing ideas and possibilities to spark careful discernment, as well as 'reading the signs of the times', enabling us to look at the horizon, spot new opportunities, possibilities and challenges.

St Paul recognises leadership and administration as one of the spiritual gifts to the life of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:28). In many ways we've been, as a tradition, wary about speaking of 'leadership', for fear it might undermine our conciliar convictions, but for Paul this is part of what enables the body to be the body.

Every local church needs leadership, which is exercised collectively by the Elders with the minister, but within that Elders meetings and Church meetings need individuals who enable and facilitate them to effectively function and discern the mind of Christ. How we equip and enable people across the diverse parts of the body that make up the United Reformed Church to exercise that form of leadership is an important question.

This last year in the Offices of the General Assembly has been challenging in many ways. The staffing restructure last year was a costly exercise for many, but important and in ensuring that we have a staffing structure fit for the middle of the 21st century and that the financial resources of the church are appropriately managed.

Pruning is not easy, but ultimately can bring new life. By and large it has been successful. Silos are breaking down, there are more dots being joined up, and the clarity which has emerged from three departments working to support three General Assembly Committees has been hugely welcome.

Interconnections

As an SLT, together with the Business Committee (and it is excellent this now contains the core committee convenors), it becomes more possible to spot the interconnections between pieces of work. Keep our collective eyes raised to the horizon and begin to enable the body of the Church to feel connected and joined up in ways which bring life.

The restructure has also revealed things to us what was previously less visible. Some of our critical infrastructure no longer meets the needs of the moment. In particular, our database and IT systems, requires urgent attention. Systems which began faithfully in an earlier era and have been carefully coaxed through many changes now need substantial reform if they are to serve the Church well into the future. These will continue to be considerations in the budget processes for the coming years.

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The Extraordinary General Assembly (EGA) for the Church Life Review process has given us a large and complex agenda for the next period of time. Inhabiting a culture where we all instinctively ask 'is this something that might be most effectively done together' before launching to resolve an immediate issue will take time. We await the full operation of the Church Life Fund Committee with some excitement and hope for what this will enable to better support local churches and new communities of worship and discipleship.

The EGA also tasked us with some major pieces of work. One is about how, together as the whole United Reformed Church, we might better be able to support local churches with their property. A major consultative exercise is currently being planned. Similarly, the root and branch review of the Ministry and Mission fund is underway.

There are some major pieces of project work that Assembly and Assembly Executive have already determined are necessary, but are yet to be fully implemented. This is largely simply about our limited capacity.

Structure

The review of the *Structure* of the Church is one major piece of work that will require careful and widespread consultation coupled with detailed legal and governance work to ensure that our constitutional provisions bring and enable life, rather than become millstones that drag us down.

Similarly, we are trying hard to move forward with a vital review of Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging across the whole church which we pray will better enable us to live out many of our deepest commitments rooted in what we hear in Christ's gospel claim upon our life together.

The EGA also pointed to yet more challenges that we need to face together. From the consultative part of the Assembly, two major, interrelated, themes emerged.

One is about the identity of the United Reformed Church. Who are we? What are we called to be? What vision is God placing before us? How does our worship enable us to be encountered by the living God and fed in ways that makes us more truly made in the image of Christ?

Challenges

Another key theme was about the shape of the ministries the church requires to meet the challenges of this and future moments and the practical realities around how this is funded. A long-term piece of work on this latter question we are inviting General Assembly to set off at this meeting.

Identity was a strong theme emerging from our discernment together, and has also been bubbling up in many places in the life of the Church. We are, at the same time as sensing these are important questions, wary of them.

Past attempts at 'identity campaigns' have left wounds and hurts many years on. In a tradition where we foundationally believe that the vocation and purpose of each local congregation is best discerned within that local congregation, in its local context, we are also wary of imposing anything that looks like a denominational 'mission strategy' on local congregations.

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Past experience tells us that when we attempt this, with the best will in the world, this is not fruitful. And yet, there are deep convictions, rooted in our traditions, which find embodiment today that we may all be helped if we can better name and own them.

We are a tradition which gathers first and foremost around scripture, which shapes and patterns our worship and our life together. We are a conciliar church, where we believe we discern better together than apart.

Roots and treasures

We are a tradition that treasures the reality that ministry belongs to the whole people of God collectively. We are a tradition with roots in dissent, and a clear conviction that the church has a government distinct from that of the state.

We are a tradition that believes the voices of all, young and old, all shape who we are and help us discern and exercise leadership. We are a church that believes the body of Christ is only experienced in its fulness in its diversity, being a multicultural church that stands against all forms of racism.

Following the EGA we believe it is right that we begin to focus our attention on how we understand and articulate our identity as the United Reformed Church in ways that deepen and enable our local discernment and life together. We are in many ways a small Church (though a large organisation!). From tiny seeds extraordinary things can emerge – as with the mustard bush.

There are still seeds to be planted for the future, which might well bear fruit for those who will come behind us. We are giving active thought to how we might enable the General Assembly, along with Synods and local churches, to begin to engage this question proactively.

In terms of the need for work on technological infrastructure and systems, as well as the work of the Church Life Fund Committee, and the pieces of work emerging from the Extraordinary General Assembly and the Church Life Review, these are all ways the church is digging around roots and fertilizing in the hope that new life will emerge.

Renewal

There are seasons in the life of churches, just as there are seasons in the life of all organisations. This is a season of review, change, and hopefully renewal.

The Church Life Review began to ask fundamental questions about who we are and how we wish to be together and how we are called to use our resources. There have been major structural changes to the work of the General Assembly and the staff team.

We believe we are still in a period of change and renewal that will fit the United Reformed Church for the opportunities and challenges of the middle of the 21st century.

Meeting faithfully the opportunities and challenges we face will continue to require commitment, imagination, prayerful discernment, engagement with scripture, and human and financial resource.

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Churches, and organisations have periods of reform and renewal, and periods of more settled life. We believe we are still called to be in a period of reform and renewal, and that if that call is truly from God, we must continue to grasp the Kairos moment and live into that, with all that entails.

Our call is to continue to plant gardens, fertilise roots and scatter tiny seeds that might become great bushes.

As the Senior Leadership Team of the work of the General Assembly, we seek to serve by enabling and equipping the General Assembly and its committees and staff to faithfully respond to this call to be active workers in the garden of God.