

Paper CD1

Ministry and Mission Review Task Group Update

Resources and Ministries Committees

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Myles Dunnett, Director of Strategy and Programmes myles.dunnett@urc.org.uk
Action required	For information only.
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To update Assembly on the work of the Resolution 46 (Ministry and Mission Fund) Task Group
Main points	<p>The Resolution 46 Task Group has been established to design and undertake a structured consultation across the United Reformed Church on the sustainability, purpose, and operation of the Ministry and Mission Fund (MMF). Initial work has focused on clarifying the historical, theological, and operational dimensions of the Fund, and identifying key tensions relating to financial sustainability, covenantal understanding, and ministerial deployment.</p> <p>The Task Group is developing a consultative process to engage synods, local churches, and other stakeholders, supported by further research into finance, deployment, and attitudes toward the fund and covenant. Findings will be synthesised into options and recommendations for General Assembly 2027.</p>
Previous relevant documents	Paper A10, Extraordinary General Assembly 2025
Consultation has taken place with...	Resources Committee; Ministries Committee; Moderators' Meeting; Synod Treasurers. <i>Extensive consultation with local churches, synods, and others is planned</i>

Summary of impact

Financial	The intention of this paper is to update Assembly on the work of the task group, rather than address the Ministry and Mission Fund itself.
External (eg ecumenical)	As part of the process, there is an effort to learn from ecumenical partners

1. Background

- 1.1. This paper is brought before Assembly by the Resolution 46 (Ministry and Mission Fund) Task Group, convened on behalf of Resources and Ministries Committees.
- 1.2. Resolution 46, enacted at the Extraordinary General Assembly in November 2025, states that:

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.
- 1.3. The Ministry and Mission Fund is experiencing a growing misalignment between its financial sustainability, covenantal intent, and practical operation. Income is declining faster than expenditure, creating a widening structural gap. At the same time, the perception that there is a connection between contributions and the provision of ministry is under pressure, affecting how the fund is understood, and requiring clarification. This raises a more fundamental question about whether contributions are, or should be, understood as linked to the provision of ministry, or whether the fund is better framed in other terms. In practice, this results in increasing pressure on synods, giving rise to difficult decision about whether a stipendiary minister should be deployed to every church or focussed where they might make the most impact, and a related risk that a covenantal model of shared responsibility is interpreted in more transactional terms. The central question is therefore not simply financial, but whether the current configuration of the fund remains aligned with its original purpose, and what this implies for the future shape of ministry in the Church.
- 1.4. At this stage, the task group's role is not to propose immediate solutions, but to ensure that the Church is able to engage these questions well, by structuring a process through which a shared understanding can be developed, and out of which collectively owned conclusions may emerge.

2. Task group details

The task group members are:

Mr Myles Dunnett (Convenor), Director of Strategy and Programmes

Revd Nicola Furley-Smith, Deputy General Secretary for Ministries

Mr John Samson, Chief Finance Officer

Ms Muna Levan-Harris, Legal and Trust Officer, Thames North Synod

Mr Alan Yates, URC Treasurer

Revd Dr Michael Hopkins, Moderator, Wessex Synod, and Convenor, Resources Committee

Revd Jamie Kissack, Moderator, Yorkshire Synod

Ms Jane Humphreys, Member, Resources Committee

Mr Steve Powell, Treasurer, West Midlands Synod

Ms Denise Harman, Premises and Finance Officer, Mersey Synod

Ms Elizabeth Hall, Convenor, North Western Synod Ministries Committee (and nominated Convenor of Ministries Committee beginning July 2026)

Ms Ornella Mbula, Strategy and Programmes Administrator, providing administrative support

- 2.1. The task group will undertake a structured and theologically grounded review of the assumptions and frameworks that shape current approaches to finance and governance within the United Reformed Church, with particular reference to the Ministry and Mission Fund and the ministry provision it sustains.
- 2.2. The task group is seeking to understand whether the current operation of the Ministry and Mission Fund remains aligned with its covenantal purpose, what this implies for the future shape of ministry in the United Reformed Church, and the best option to address the current challenges.
- 2.3. A full copy of the task group's terms of reference is included as Appendix One.

3. Scriptural basis

- 3.1. There are several scriptural backgrounds to the group's work. One of them is drawn from Luke 13:18-21:
¹⁸Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches." Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? ²¹It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."
- 3.2. Jesus offers two images of the Kingdom: a mustard seed that becomes a tree big enough for birds to nest in, and a small measure of yeast worked into a vast quantity of flour, which leavens the whole. Both begin with modest, almost unremarkable acts, yet the emphasis is on faithfulness of action rather than scale of input. What begins humbly becomes sheltering and nourishing.
- 3.3. The Church's life has never depended solely on what is immediately visible, but on repeated covenantal faithfulness. These images resonate with the Church's conciliar life: a shared work, undertaken patiently and collectively, through which something greater may emerge over time.
- 3.4. The group believes that its task is to discern, and to enable others to discern, what faithful sowing and careful mixing might look like now, and to do so trusting that a renewed covenant can, with God's grace, become more than we presently see.

4. Understanding the Ministry and Mission Fund

- 4.1. There are many different understandings and perceptions of the Ministry and Mission Fund. The Ministry and Mission Fund can be understood across four interrelated layers, and their relation to its current operation.
- 4.2. Historical
Firstly, it is worth considering the history of the fund and its inheritance from the URC's predecessor traditions. The Ministry and Mission Fund can trace its roots back to the Presbyterian Church of England's Sustentation Fund, formed in 1869. The purpose was to pool resources, so wealthier congregations supported poorer ones. At that time, Congregational churches paid ministers locally, often unevenly, and with stigma attached to central support. When the URC formed in 1972, it adopted the Presbyterian model, centralising payroll and contributions by

1977. In the 1990s, separate funding streams were merged into a single Ministry and Mission Fund for clarity.

4.3. Normative

This layer relates to what the Ministry and Mission Fund is intended to do. The fund's purpose is most clearly and explicitly laid out in the Plan for Partnership, a document which was first approved by Assembly in 1980 and has been routinely updated ever since. The Plan is based on the URC's ethos as expressed in the Basis of Union. The fundamental principle of the fund is a covenantal theology of mutuality, expressed financially. It asserts that resources are shared because the Church is one body, that ministry is discerned and distributed collectively, and that giving is an act of participation in common mission, not a transactional exchange.

4.4. Reality

There is a need to understand the reality of the fund, and whether its current operation fulfils its intended purpose. There are several ways to assess the reality of the fund's operations.

4.4.1. Financially, the current Ministry and Mission Fund model is under significant pressure: the fund's income does not cover the intended costs. Annual income is falling by 3%, while the call on the fund is only falling by 1% per annum; this 2% gap equates to around £330,000 per annum. The current situation is likely to worsen over the coming years. Changes in contributions from local churches, largely due to church closures and membership decline, has put pressure on synods to fill the gap. Synods have been generous in filling this gap, but there will soon come a point where synods cannot cover the shortfall.

4.4.2. In covenantal terms, there is a range of perceptions, including that local church contributions are, or should be, directly linked to the provision of ministry. This is leading to frustration and changed understandings around the purpose of the fund. There is lack of clarity around the nature of, and parties to, the covenant.

4.4.3. Deployment is another way to understand the empirical reality of the fund. Synod moderators find it increasingly hard to prioritise deployment of ministers. The result of this is that it is hard to focus ministry where it might have the most impact. Ministers are also spread ever thinner, having a personal impact on them, as well as impacts on their congregations.

4.4.4. There are no simple answers to the problem with the fund. Taking immediate short-term action would only delay the need to address the underlying strategic questions.

4.5. Strategic

There is finally the strategic layer, which relates to key questions and tensions emerging from the interaction between the fund's purpose and its current operation. These include the degree of alignment between contribution and ministry received, variation in synod assessment approaches, limited transparency around the cost of ministry, and increasing difficulty in deploying ministry where it will have the greatest impact. A further complicating factor is that

many of these questions cannot yet be answered with confidence, due to limited visibility of how the fund operates in practice across the Church. This lack of shared, accessible data constrains both understanding and decision-making.

5. Approach to the work

- 5.1. In line with experience from the Church Life Review process, the task group is pursuing a consultative methodology, aiming to get the right people into the right spaces to consider the issue in a structured, safe, strategic way. This methodology is a living out of the Church's conciliar polity. This process needs to reach widely across the councils of the Church, including engagement with a diversity of local contexts. Only after this process is complete will it be possible to synthesise outputs and begin to shape a recommendation to Assembly in July 2027.
- 5.2. The task group has also noted that the lack of understanding around the purpose and operation of the fund is partly due to the absence of data. There is much that is unknown about the fund. The task group believes that the reality of the fund's operation needs to be brought into the light, so that discernment and eventual decision making is done with reference to high-quality evidence. This will include quantitative (finance, deployment, trends), qualitative (perceptions, theology, attitudes), and comparative (ecumenical) learning. There will therefore be a phase of groundwork, laying out findings, before other questions can be meaningfully explored.

6. Methodology and initial work plans – four areas

6.1. Research

The first piece of ongoing work is research, exploring areas including:

- Synod formulae
- The relationship between church level contribution and receipt of ministry
- The relationship between synod contribution and deployment
- Ecumenical learning
- Structural options

6.2. Local church consultation

The second piece of work will be wide engagement with local churches, split into two phases:

6.2.1. Firstly, a groundwork communications phase, building on ecumenical learning about the importance of setting the scene before engaging in funding conversations. Themes will include the theology of money, stewardship, discipleship, ministry and mission, and the cost of ministry.

6.2.2. Secondly, through questionnaires, webinars, and Synod Meetings in Autumn 2026, there will be an exploration of attitudes to the fund, churches' perception of their financial positions, the quality of historic communications around the Ministry and Mission Fund, and local expenses, potentially alongside other questions.

6.3. Denominational consultation

The third piece of work will be a denominational-level consultative event (25-26 January 2027), drawing together a wide and representative cohort including representatives of General Assembly, its offices, and committees, ministers,

synod officers, synod trust company directors, and representatives of local churches. Synods have been invited to send nine representatives each, including a balance of synod officers/staff and local church members.

6.4. Final questions

The fourth planned piece of work relates to essential final questions which need to be posed after the local church and denominational consultative processes, exploring financial matters, which will only be possible after initial exploratory work has been completed. Following this, the Task Group will meet to review all the evidence they have gathered and prepare a recommendation for General Assembly 2027.

Appendix One – Task Group Terms of Reference

1. Background

General Assembly, at its meeting in November 2025, agreed Resolution 46, which instructs the Resources and Ministries Committees to arrange a consultation with synod officers, synod trust company trustees, and other relevant decision-makers, to address underlying theological, strategic, and covenantal questions related to finance and governance, particularly in relation to the sustainability of the Ministry and Mission Fund (MMF) and the ministry provision made possible by that fund.

In response, the Resources and Ministries Committees have established a Task Group to undertake focused work on these matters and to bring forward and update to General Assembly 2026 and recommendations to General Assembly 2027.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the Task Group is to undertake a structured and theologically grounded review of the assumptions and frameworks that shape current approaches to finance and governance within the United Reformed Church, with particular reference to the Ministry and Mission Fund and the ministry provision it sustains. The work will integrate theological, covenantal, missional, and strategic perspectives, ensuring that financial and governance models are examined in light of the Church's ecclesiology, conciliar life, and long-term sustainability.

3. Core Deliverables

The task group will:

1. Exploration and Articulation

Explore, analyse, and clearly articulate the theological, covenantal, and strategic assumptions that underpin present approaches to finance and governance within the United Reformed Church, with particular reference to:

- a) the Ministry and Mission Fund, and
- b) the ministry provision it currently enables and sustains.

2. Consultation Process

Design and implement a structured, transparent, and representative consultative process across the Church, engaging relevant councils, committees, office-holders, local church members, and other stakeholders in order to test assumptions, gather insight, and identify emerging priorities and concerns.

3. Recommendations to General Assembly

Produce a set of evidence-based and theologically coherent recommendations arising from this work for General Assembly 2027, for consideration and decision within an agreed timeframe.

4. Scope of Work

The Task Group shall:

- a. Facilitate consultation with synod officers, synod trust company trustees, local church members, and other relevant decision-makers, ensuring that a range of perspectives is heard.
- b. Examine the theological and covenantal foundations of shared financial responsibility within the URC, including mutuality, trust, accountability, and vocation.
- c. Consider the relationship between governance structures and financial sustainability, including how current arrangements support or constrain the Church's capacity to sustain ministry.

- d. Reflect on the sustainability of the Ministry and Mission Fund in light of current and projected financial pressures, demographic trends, and patterns of ministry.
- e. Identify key strategic questions and options for the future, noting areas of consensus, tension, and risk.
- f. Develop clear recommendations for consideration by the Resources and Ministries Committees, including whether changes to policy, practice, or governance structures should be proposed.

5. Membership

The Task Group shall be convened on behalf of the Resources and Ministries Committees and shall include:

The Deputy General Secretary (Ministries)

The Convenor of Resources Committee

URC Treasurer

Chief Finance Officer

Synod Moderator and member of Ministries Committee

Synod Treasurer

Director of Strategy and Programmes

Broader Trust perspective

Synod Finance Officer

2 x other representatives with wider ministry perspective

Such other members as the committees deem necessary to ensure appropriate expertise and balance.

The Task Group shall be Chaired by the Director of Strategy and Programmes, to ensure every member can contribute without reservation, and to incorporate learning from the Church Life Review process and consultations.

6. Reporting and Accountability

The Task Group shall report to the Resources and Ministries Committees. Its final output shall be a report, including recommendations, to enable the committees to bring a resolution to General Assembly 2027.

7. Timescale

The Task Group shall commence its work as soon as practicable following appointment.

8. Administrative Support

Administrative support shall be provided by the Strategy and Programmes Administrator, including the coordination of meetings and circulation of papers. Consultation administration will be supported by the Strategy and Programmes Administrator.