

Paper N2

Initial update from the Church Life Review

Church Life Review Group

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The General Secretary john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Discussion and decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Assembly Executive welcomes the initial report of the Church Life Review Group, and affirms its direction of travel.2) Assembly Executive affirms the proposal to engage in partnership with <i>Theos</i> to undertake research into the identity, hopes, dreams and expectations of local congregations within the United Reformed Church.3) Assembly Executive affirms the proposal to work with Moore Kingston Smith to analyse income, expenditure and capital across the family of the General Assembly and the synods. It encourages all parts of the United Reformed Church to engage positively in this process.4) Assembly Executive requests the General Secretariat to engage in a quick review of present structures and

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)

Introduction

1. **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love”.** (Ephesians 1: 3-4).
2. We are the Church by the grace of God. As St Paul writes to the young and divided church in Ephesus he reminds them that their calling finds its origin before creation itself. He goes on to point them to the reality that God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesus.1: 10). Our call to be the People of God, the body of Christ, in the corner of space and time the United Reformed Church finds itself serving, is one we must respond to with faithfulness. It is not one we must respond to thinking that the future of Christ’s work within creation depends on our human efforts or plans. Church review processes can suffer from a ‘saviour complex’ – that we must find the mission plan or strategy that will save the church as we know it. That is not our task. Our task is simple faithfulness to God as disciples of Jesus Christ. The life of the church ultimately rests in God’s hands.
3. St Paul prays for the Church in Ephesus that they will be given “a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know [Christ], so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which [Christ] has called you”. That prayer is our prayer too. The task ahead of the church in the next few years is significant. Wisdom requires us to take seriously the challenges and issues that we face. We do that precisely because that is how we honour the hope to which God has called us. That hope is universal in scope – it is a hope offered to the whole of creation. Bearing witness to that good news is our primary task as a church. Being disciples is to follow the One who offers us that hope more faithfully. This call must frame all that we do.
4. “For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us”. One theme that kept returning in our reflections was that of trust, or rather, the lack of trust. We notice this throughout the life of the United Reformed Church. Local churches distrust synods, who can seem distant and unaccountable. Synods distrust the General Assembly of the Church. Church House seems distant, and yet another source of arbitrary decision making. There is mistrust between wealthy synods and synods lacking resources. Trust can be swiftly lost, and only slowly gained. Trust is won when we understand one another as siblings in Christ, when we are transparent and honest about the pressures that we are all facing, when decisions are taken openly, and wherever possible within the councils of the church itself. It seems to us imperative that we all seek to live together in ways that build trust. We need to find honesty to articulate when trust is lacking, and

5. The Church Life Review group met for the first time in person and residentially at the end of October 2021. Our reflections were framed by abiding with the opening chapters of Ephesians, which is perhaps the most profound and sustained reflection on the life of the church the New Testament offers us. The scale of the task before us is immense. There are elements of it which are about catching visions and dreaming dreams, and particularly listening to the hopes and dreams of the front-line of the work of the church. Part of the challenge is about resources: stipendiary ministry becomes scarce and thinly spread; the pool of volunteer service that has been bedrock of our tradition is drying up; and we are a long way from being able to make strategic, informed decisions about our finances as the whole of the United Reformed Church. Our structures are over-blown for the size of organisation we now are, and sometimes restrict us from being able to move swiftly to respond to the change we are constantly living with, and becomes increasingly difficult to populate.

6.

Partnership research with the think-tank *Theos*

17. Listening to the voices of local congregations needs to be at the heart of our work. We believe that this will be best achieved in partnership with those with professional skills in qualitative research. This is research that takes a sample of local contexts, and seeks through focus groups, interviews, careful observation of the context and the like to come to a deep understanding of that local context. We believe that we have found a partner for a piece of work like this in *Theos*, a think tank that specialises in qualitative research into the relationship of faith and society. (www.theosthinktank.co.uk). *Theos* have undertaken work with organisations like Churches Together in England, the Church of England, University Chaplaincies, Cathedrals etc.
18. A careful selection of a small number of local churches will need to be determined. They will be geographically spread, represent different socio-economic contexts, be a mixture of churches that represent growing, stable and declining churches and so on. The number of churches would be small (this would need determining in conjunction with those with appropriate methodological skills) but may be as small as around ten. The aim would be to arrive at a careful and detailed listening to those churches, their hopes, dreams and aspirations, what barriers they feel are in the way to realising those hopes, and seeking to hear what they are seeking from the wider United Reformed Church to support them in their vocation.
19. Alongside this detailed qualitative work may also be a quantitative aspect to the work, that would use the annual church return to gather information from across the United Reformed Church. We are still determining to what extent this is data we can collect ourselves, and to what extent it would enrich the qualitative data which we would expect to be more revealing.
20. The aim would be to gain an understanding of the identity of the United Reformed Church, about what forms of new life and work are being engaged with, examples of the 'hope that is within' local congregations, a sense of what barriers local churches perceive to their flourishing, and a sense of what congregations are seeking from the wider councils of the church to support them in their vocation to be the body of Christ.
21. The methodological design of the research would be undertaken by work between *Theos* and a reference group made up of members of the Church Life Review Group. The design may also explore whether it is also possible as part of research of this variety to explore aspects of the wider church (it might, for example, be possible for a couple of case studies not to be local churches but, for example, a synod, or a national-church piece of work like URCYouth or the Daily Devotions).

Partnership with Moore Kingston Smith in Forensic Accounting

22. We believe gaining transparent, comparable, detailed financial information across the 14 entities that manage the finances of the United Reformed Church family is vital if we are to make good decisions about how we use our resources as a family. Moore Kingston Smith (MKS – the firm who audits the

Theology and money

28. We believe that we need to do a piece of work on our foundational principles and convictions around the use of money, how scripture speaks to this and what our theological convictions around money and resources are. This can begin by a careful examination of previous decisions we've made and statements we've made. It may then need to move into a more

Accelerants

40. There are a range of actions we believe that the church could take to assist in the flourishing of church life. Some might be able to be taken very quickly, others could only be developed and worked on when there is a much clearer sense of the resources that are available to us. There are also some ideas which could be born in mind now, which might help prepare for the possibility of future developments.
41. Building on the work we have done on safeguarding, we believe there is scope to support local churches by providing more model policies and guidance at national level. This could be made available online to local churches and synods. A site that held up to date policy documents, pro-formas for things such as risk assessments, local church policies etc that was an easy to access 'one-stop-shop' for local churches and synods could be very helpful. We have asked those working on the development of new IT infrastructure for Church House to bear this in mind.
42. We believe that there is a case for reviewing the Special Category Ministry scheme. Undoubtedly SCMs have done some great work, but there is a sense that perhaps the scheme, rather than the post-holders within the scheme, has not fully achieved what was imagined in terms of innovation. There is perhaps an unrealistic expectation placed on an individual ministry in an SCM post if the aim is to emerge a new Christian community. If we wish to take seriously founding new worshipping communities, research suggests it needs a small team of people to effectively enable a new congregation to grow, or to plant one. This might require the linking of ministerial resource with other resource. We will engage with the Ministries Committee to enquire whether placing a temporary halt on new applications for SCM posts, pending a review of the scheme in the light of the further work of the Church Life Review, might be helpful.
43. Looking further to the future, we believe that a greater concentration on exploring ways of encouraging vocations to ministry, particularly in much younger people, could be explored. Internship programmes around university degrees, or apprenticeship style programmes might form a context where people gain wider experience of church life, the church benefits from the gifts and graces of participants, and a context where vocation can be actively explored.
44. There will be a wide range of exciting possibilities that we gather in the course of our work, we are sure. The purpose of this first phase is to gain the information and data we need to be able to determine what resources we have to steward, how we best might steward them, which will in turn enable us to think about what new ways of working, and new pieces of mission and witness become possible.

Conclusions

45. **“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and**