

Paper N1

Church Life Review GA 2023 report

General Secretary/Church Life Review

Basic information

**Contact name and
email address**

John Bradbury, General Secretary

locally accessible, support functions for local churches in areas including (but not exclusively):

finance
property
health and safety
human resources
safeguarding.

It asks the task group to bring a model, or models, to General Assembly 2024 with feasibility studies and costings.

Resolution 50

General Assembly invites the General Secretariat and PLATO to re-establish the PLATO handbook (or equivalent), providing a central online resource of advice and pro-formas for trust, property, financial and related matters for local congregations, to be available on-line at the latest by General Assembly 2025.

Resolution 51

General Assembly empowers the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to set up a working group to examine:

- a) What models of employed lay work can be effective within local churches.
- b) What infrastructure is necessary to be provided by the wider church to support employed lay ministry in local churches.
- c) How mission and ministry which would lead to the emergence of new United Reformed Church communities of discipleship and worship might be encouraged and resourced.

1. **Planting gardens**

1.1.

produce. Take 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. But 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. (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

Others have struggled with the pace that we have set. Our prayer is that we have planted seeds, and provided resources to the wider church that might nourish the work that will follow as the garden is tended.

- 1.6.** We were convinced from the outset that providing a grand plan for the United Reformed Church some kind of church-wide mission strategy was to misunderstand both our real need and to misunderstand what can really make a difference to our life in local churches. We remain convinced that the primary place for the discerning local Church and Elders meetings. There are some who are frustrated with that, and who struggle to see how, without a clear denominational vision, we can set priorities and use resources effectively.

We believe, as a result of much prayer, worship, discernment, consultation and information gathering, that key to the flourishing of the United Reformed Church is to resource as effectively as we can our local churches, and other frontlines of mission. It is for local churches to utilise those resources in service of the vision they have caught for their life together in their context. We will invite General Assembly to affirm that the primary strategic purpose of the wider Councils of the United Reformed Church is to serve the flourishing of local churches and only to undertake such work that furthers the gospel and flourishing of the whole body that cannot be undertaken by the local church.

- 1.7.** The conciliar nature of the United Reformed Church leads us to understand that strategy cannot emerge top-down, rather it emerges as we engage together. We have learned the vital importance of first-class facilitation for that to happen. We experienced this as Fiona Bennett facilitated our consultation with Synod

General Assembly 2023, we want to thank you for the remarkable opportunity that you have given us to see so much that is good in the life of the United Reformed Church.

2. Where we have come from

2.1. In November 2022 we reported to Mission Council on our progress to date. At that point, we were to some extent in something of a limbo position. We were waiting on major consultations with Synod Moderators and about finance and trust matters, and on the Theos report. We were in the process of consulting further on changes to committee structures, and reported on the consultation feedback at that point. This General Assembly report is the first time we have the substantive material for detailed discussion to follow.

2.2. We have come to realise that it is vital to understand that there have been various significant attempts to grapple with serious issues that have faced the United

been harvested from many of these initiatives, perhaps most radically in the

adopted. Many of the issues that we have been identifying were identified and constructive suggestions made to engage them in

up, asking them to address significant and difficult issues, bringing radical proposals to General Assembly only for them to be rejected, and to find ourselves a few years later staring at the same problems and at times regretting not having tackled them more boldly earlier.

2.3. In the light of the above, we are not bringing a set of resolutions to effect radical change. That is not realistic in the timescale to which we have been working, and neither do we believe it is the most helpful way to effect change. Rather, the recommendations we bring seek to define some basic principles we may discern as guiding future work and decision making, seeking to identify some key aspirations that we believe if followed through with would make a significant difference to the ability of United Reformed Churches to flourish, and to set off further detailed work exploring the feasibility of possible options.

2.4. What is radically new in the work we have done is the attempt to engage the question of money. How are we called to use the financial resources we have is a theological question, and one that the United Reformed Church has not examined previously. It is perhaps telling that when we looked at past General Assemblies (see table 6 (co)4(m).33 Tm

range of possibilities for supporting partnerships of congregations which have not been significantly engaged with. This paper seeks to help local churches recognise what key elements of church life are vital for flourishing and offers a range of ways forward that might offer new life. The full version of this resources is in the Book of Reports at N4.

3.5 General Assembly Committee structure: We have engaged in a process of reconsidering the structures of the General Assembly. There is universal agreement that we need smaller, more compact structures, that require far fewer people to fill them. This part of our work, more than most, suffered from a lack of capacity to move forward consultation in the ways hoped. An interim report was issued at Assembly Executive 2022, but the further hoped for consultation has been lacking. We bring therefore reduced proposals regarding structures but wish to test the mind of Assembly on moving forward with aspects that seem to have met with widespread agreement and to set off a process to continue this work and bring it to completion. These proposals are contained in an appendix to this main report.

3.6 Consultations:

2022. More specifically, aware of the unparalleled oversight that the Moderators meeting has of the whole United Reformed Church we met with the Moderators meeting for a 48-hour consultation facilitated by the Moderator of General Assembly, the Revd Fiona Bennett. We were also very aware that the process of thinking through questions surrounding the resourcing of local churches at the level of finances, and dealing with the compliance challenges that face us, was something that requires joined-up thinking from across the 14 legal entities that make up the wider URC.

For the first time in the history of the United Reformed Church, we brought together the Convenors of all the Trust Comp

4.6 **What is experienced as the shortage of stipendiary ministers cannot be addressed by simply ordaining more stipendiary ministers.** There are not large numbers of people coming forward to candidate for ministry (and we need to be realistic about the pool of suitable people who might receive a vocation given the demographic of the overwhelming proportion of the URC), and there is a limit to the number of certificates of eligibility the M&M fund can sustain. This does not mean the issue cannot be addressed, there are various things we can do, but many of them have resource implications. We can do the following.

4.1.1. Begin to **think in the round about ministry beyond stipendiary target figures.** How can we proactively address deployment as being about stipendiary, non-stipendiary (models 1-3 and 4) ministers and CRCWs, Lay Preachers, Lay Pioneers and Elders? One precious resource within the Church is our Lay Preachers. Often, however, at the end of training and commissioning they

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Church, to explore what learning there is for the wider C

- e) **We value local *diversity* within the family of the United Reformed Church, rather than constraining uniformity.**

5.7.1 These values and principles emerged from the consultation at Yarnfield. Initially we worked simply with the principles, but it was clear from reaction in the meeting that there was a strong desire to set specific principles in the wider context of our values. These values and principles were found helpful as a tool to evaluate different options for future ways of working. We believe that in setting these as the values and principles by which we will evaluate potential option for new ways of sharing resources and administering them, future Assemblies will be greatly assisted in their discernment.

5.8 Resolution 48: 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) **carry out detailed feasibility work for each model**
- c) **determine what structural or legal changes might be necessary to enable each model to function**
- d) **evaluate each model against the Values and Principles General Assembly has adopted**

tied up in attending to necessary and important, but time consuming, compliance matters. We believe that, working together, and sharing our resources in new ways, it would be possible to offer resources, locally accessible, to congregations. This resolution invites feasibility work into this.

This emerges out of reflection at Yarnfie

