

# URC South Western Synod Meeting 9<sup>th</sup> March 2024

## Report from the Discipleship and Service Committee

Prepared by Revd Neil Thorogood, Convener (email: [ministerthurc@gmail.com](mailto:ministerthurc@gmail.com))

The committee has continued to advocate and coordinate Synod work in areas of training, resourcing, support and encouragement for all members of our congregations and those who share leadership and pastoral oversight amongst us. At the end of this report we turn to very specific matters arising from the Synod Executive's recent review with the Synod Pastoral Advisors (SPAs). Other matters we have held on our agenda recently include:

1. We want to express our gratitude for all who made the October 2023 Synod meeting such a success. We are indebted to all who hosted, prepared, led and offered workshops. Many people have reflected upon how good it was to meet in person, to meet so many people and to explore so many different and creative resources. With others, the committee will seek to build upon this foundation.
2. Providing the necessary assistance and interviewing to enable a candidate for the URC's Ministry of Word and Sacraments to proceed to our denomination's Assessment Conference in March 2024. We hold them in our prayers that the Spirit will guide and discernment be fruitful.
3. Connecting with the wider URC networks for interfaith and racial justice matters and seeking to have material shared across the Synod. At our October 2023 Synod meeting we passed an emergency resolution about our deep concerns surrounding the conflict between Israel and Hamas and letters with the resolution went to all of the Members of Parliament covering the South Western Synod. We received very few replies. That horror has exploded and the suffering for Palestinians, and the unknown fate of Israeli hostages, appal us. The URC's General Assembly may well have resolutions on this nightmare. As I write this report, the Anglican House of Bishops have stated: "With the onset of Israel's ground offensive into Rafah, we call for an immediate ceasefire. The relentless bombardment of Gaza and its huge cost in civilian lives and civilian infrastructure must stop. The manner in which this war is being prosecuted cannot be morally justified."
4. Stepwise continues to connect with people across the Synod with new groups starting in Bristol and, potentially, in Haydon Wick. There are plans for a Synod-wide Zoom version which we hope might be accessible to many more people.

5. The next ministers and local church leaders Spring School will take place at Saunton Sands Hotel, 22-25 April 2024. A good number have registered and an excellent programme will include Bible studies with Revd Nicola Furley-Smith, URC Secretary for Ministries, and Tina Hodgett from the Church Mission Society.
6. Most of those for whom it is either required (serving URC Ministers) or strongly encouraged by our Synod (Local Church Leaders) are now receiving pastoral supervision. The Synod reimburses the costs for this now so that there is no direct cost for congregations and a much simplified payment process.

### **Reflections Arising from the Review of Synod Pastoral Advisors**

Strongly encouraged by the Synod Executive, Discipleship and Service also discussed the recent SPA review when we met in February. There can be significant overlap between the remits of Executive, the Pastoral Committee and Discipleship and Service in the work SPAs do.

Our focus in Discipleship and Service in connection with the vital work our SPAs undertake has been upon issues including:

- How discipleship and leadership training is created and delivered across the Synod
- How we ensure the Synod fruitfully and sustainably links into wider networks such as the URC's Training and Development Officers and shares resources, expertise, advice and encouragement
- The overstretch that many are handling as key areas of Synod life, including the encouragement of lay preaching, candidating for ordination, elders' training and more lack identified people with time and skills to support them. We recognise the uniqueness of our situation without a Moderator at present and the extra demands this inevitably creates. But the moderatorial vacancy is perhaps also allowing us to notice where some of the weaknesses and gaps are in our structures and available people. With congregations and leaderships under ever-increasing pressure, these concerns around the support we offer grow rather than decline. The SPAs have done magnificent work in the midst of these pressures. But they have been finding themselves increasingly needing to focus upon crises and being reactive rather than the ongoing 'walking alongside' congregations, ministers and others that their role as supporters and encouragers originally envisaged.
- The need to reassess the areas SPAs cover and the hours they have available for this ministry.
- How the evolving needs and opportunities across our congregations shape Synod provision of support and training now and in coming years.

These reflections lead the Discipleship and Service Committee to suggest that the time might be right for the Synod to explore if our current pattern and level of Synod roles to support and resource local congregations is appropriate. We have no sense that the SPA roles should be discontinued. Instead, we wonder if additional staffing might be essential? We have no blueprint to offer the Synod because we believe there needs to be

wide consultation and exploration. But we sense that this may be a moment when such work could be a priority. It will, of course, need to include any newly appointed Moderator. But we wonder if some of the thinking can begin well ahead of this happy arrival? Indeed, if Synod was supportive, it could become part of the reality into which any new Moderator arrives.

The sorts of questions we might wish to explore across the Synod could include:

- a) Is the time right for us to reconsider some sort of Synod training and development staffing to work alongside existing resources (including SPAs)?
- b) Given the Synod's geography, what might be the most fruitful number and location of any additional Synod staffing and how does this interact with SPA areas and responsibilities?
- c) What funding implications are there for a sustainable evolution in staffing?
- d) How might any new appointments relate to the work of SPAs, existing Synod staff, the Moderator, wider URC structures and networks, ecumenical colleagues, etc.?
- e) What sort of new Synod post(s) would local churches find most helpful and see as most necessary?
- f) What sorts of skills and experiences would any new posts demand?
- g) Are we talking about ordained or lay positions and what are the funding and deployment implications?
- h) What can we learn from the other URC Synods and ecumenical partners that might help us develop our answers?

You will certainly have further questions that we could explore. To take any of this further, Discipleship and Service invites Synod to consider the following resolution.

## **Resolutions**

- A. This meeting of the URC South Western Synod asks the Synod Executive, in discussion with all relevant parties, to create a task group to explore Synod staffing in the light of the SPA review and reflections from the Discipleship and Service Committee.**
- B. This task group to consult as widely as necessary in order to bring a report and, if appropriate, suitable resolutions to a future meeting of the Synod no later than March 2025.**