

United Reformed Church South Western Synod

Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Attendance: 96 people attended: 47 church representatives, 28 serving ministers, 4 local church leaders, 5 retired ministers, 12 synod officers/staff and visitors. There were 9 apologies: 1 church representative, 3 serving ministers, 2 Local Church Leaders, 2 retired ministers.

OPENING WORSHIP was led by Revd Gerald England and was on the theme of being a disciple in a time of Covid. Our worship included In Memoriam and the following were remembered: Revd Amanda Harper: Died 26th November 2020.

Revd Bernard Grimsey: Died 4th December 2020

Revd John Salisbury: Died 5th December 2020

Mr Peter Rouse: Died 18 December 2020

Mrs Sheila Roach: Died 4th January 2021

Revd Tom Bush: Died 20th January 2021

Revd Jeffrey Armitstead: Died 13th February 2021

Dr David Somervell: Died 10th March 2021

The Moderator constituted the 97TH meeting of Synod. Apologies for absence received via the Synod Office.

Minutes of the last Synod held in October 2020 on Zoom were AGREED.

MOVING OUT OF THE SYNOD

Revd Mike Burrell: Moved to Hampshire in December 2020.

CHANGES WITHIN THE SYNOD

Mrs Jacquey Newton:

Left role of Local Church Leader at Living Waters Church, Lynton, end December 2020.

Mr Roger Newton:

Left role of Church Treasurer at Living Waters Church, Lynton, end December 2020.

Revd Peter Henderson:

Left role of Synod Pastoral Advisor, Somerset Area, at the end of January 2021.

Mr John Waines: Retired as Lay Preacher – Bristol Area, January 2021.

Mr David Lee: Retired as Lay Preacher – Devon South & East Area, January 2021.

Mr Alan Jones: Retired as Lay Preacher – Bristol Area, March 2021. Lay Preacher since 1995.

Ms Michelle Howard: Leaving role of Church Development Worker to take up role with a specialist care agency.

CHURCH CHANGES

Kingskerswell URC - closed November 2020.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

- Next Youth Genesis chapter of work:

A video produced by Youth Genesis about their current work was shown to the meeting. Jon Oliverio, Youth Genesis, spoke about the different ways churches can be part of community post covid. Some of things suggested were safe spaces for domestic abuse, for vulnerable people and others. Churches need to speak to Synod Pastoral Adviser about next steps if they wish to partner with Youth Genesis. He urged churches to go away and pray about how churches can connect with their community and whether they are being urged to respond.

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Safeguarding & trustee responsibility

There was an update on training opportunities for trustees/elders – dates shown on screen but also given in E-News and training for Safeguarding [also in E-News]. All training will be by Zoom.

ANNUAL DATA:

A question from Tony Langmead was raised about 25p/mile that has not changed for many years: Dick Gray explained that this is known as a 'casual rate' and recommended by the Inland Revenue. We will remain in line with HMRC guidelines.

Resolution 1:

Synod notes the following to be applicable until further notice:

- 1. The synod agreed minimum ministerial housing allowance is either £4,000 per year grossed up to take account of income tax and national insurance or by annual application of the formula set down in the plan for partnership.*
- 2. Mileage rate on synod business is 25 pence per mile or the costs of public transport.*
- 3. Where the ownership of a manse is shared between the Synod Trust and the local church (i.e., there is an Equity Share) the local church is responsible for all expenses and repairs unless agreed otherwise. When the manse is occupied by a minister, this is in accordance with the Plan for Partnership (which is available on the URC website).*
- 4. The Default Minimum Apportionment of the proceeds from the sale of buildings where there is a continuing local church is 60:40 between the Synod and the local church.* This was AGREED

NOMINATIONS

- Synod Nominations - paper has been on website and amendments made as required.
- General Assembly: same people as last year but GA did not go ahead – list of names had been on the website for comment and it will go ahead via Zoom. A question about there being no representation from the BAME group. The mismatch occurred due to the BAME representative having to withdraw. *Post meeting: The Synod Clerk received the name of someone willing to attend and the list was amended to reflect this. The amended list will be posted on the website.*

Resolution 2:

- *Synod accepts the nominations listed, with thanks to all those who have agreed to serve.* This was AGREED

FINANCE:

The M&M pledge from SW Synod for 2020 was £1,275,000 and our actual contribution was £ 1,205,371 so we were approximately £70,000 short of our target. Some churches have offered additional funds. Our commitment for 2021 is £1,230,000.

Thanks, were given to those churches who contributed, with particular thanks to those that increased contributions by the 1% requested and to those who gave considerably more.

The 2020 accounts

The Synod Treasurer reminded the meeting that figures provided for March Synod are unaudited and usually result in significant changes during the audit process. The comparison figures for 2019 are post audit figures.

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Income

Major category	2019	2020
Investment Income	332,067	589,441
Donations, grants & legacies	596,823	13,894
Funds from closed churches	1,014,553	17,213
Charitable income	10,527	0
Other income	71,771	8,247
Total	2,025,741	628,795

Although our income was significantly less than in the previous year, this was largely due to one-off closures of churches. Our investment income on the other hand was larger than anticipated.

Expenditure – Grants

Our grants were overall less than in previous years. There is one large grant for 5 years which skews the institutional figures, but this shows up as commitments in our liabilities for future years. The negative figure under property grants is the removal of grants that have been agreed but never claimed. Property grants expire 2 years after grant unless the work has started, and claims have been made.

Category	2019	2020
Institutional Grants	29,860	86,260
Mission & Enabling Grants	14,776	108,341
Property Grants	186,824	(2,671)
Other Grants	1,440	1,760
Total Grants	232,900	193,690

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Expenditure – Direct costs

It will come as no surprise that we did not run any conferences or significant training activities in 2020.

Other costs were like previous years:

Category	2019	2020
Training & conferences	44,225	7,235
Church Support	3,072	3,424
Special Ministries	6,571	6,861
Pastoral Advisors	26,214	33,841
Direct staff costs	93,073	82,560
Property costs	28,964	19,375
Other costs	2,729	6,627
Total	204,848	159,924

Expenditure – Support costs

The main item to note is the overall reduction of costs and activities with limited travel or meeting costs.

Category	2019	2020
Synod & Area costs	11,215	2,266
Printing, stationery & Postage	8,759	7,304
Utilities	4,199	3,725
Office costs	19,577	14,391
Property costs	13,812	16,751
Governance costs	11,019	2,272
Depreciation & impairment	139,178	67,588
Staff costs	144,684	142,087
Total	352,444	256,384

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Summary of current account income and expenditure

Category	2019	2020
Income	2,025,741	628,795
Grants	232,900	193,690
Direct costs	204,848	159,924
Support costs	352,444	256,384
Fund raising costs	1,871	6,065
Total spend	792,063	616,063
Surplus/(Loss)	1,233,678	12,732

The major change is that of income (see above).

Summary of income and expenditure

Category	2019	2020
Net incoming	1,233,678	12,732
Gains/(losses) on assets	1,902,833	833,769
Net funds movement	3,136,511	846,501

We have been fortunate to have a significant increase in the values of both some property items and of our investments due in no small part to excellent investment managers.

Balance sheet

Category	2019	2020
Tangible assets	2,445,611	2,924,872
Investment property	3,826,721	2,717,730
Other investments	9,626,920	10,967,463
Current Assets	837,260	933,550
Current liabilities	(302,173)	(230,883)
Long term liabilities	(144,673)	(180,959)
Net Assets	16,289,666	17,131,773

United Reformed Church South Western Synod

Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Tangible assets increased with the purchase of a manse in Ilfracombe. The investment property reductions are the sale of Norton Fitzwarren, Falmouth church and manse and the sale of a manse in Swindon. Dick noted that we will be looking at pensions in great detail as the Pension Regulator is making changes to how these are managed.

Ministry & Mission:

Dick reminded the meeting about the way in which M&M goes 'over the head of Synod' to the Central denomination to pay stipends, training, mission initiatives, communications, etc. Synod money pays enabling grants, property grants, pays for Synod staff to support churches, etc.

MINISTRIES: The Moderator expressed thanks to the members of Ministry committee, and indeed all the Synod committees, for their work.

PASTORAL COMMITTEE:

The Moderator spoke about the deployment of ministers across denomination, in SW Synod:

Deployment target data in 2021:

Stipendiary ministers of the URC are available to serve the whole denomination and are paid a stipend from central denomination funds. These funds mostly come from the 'Ministry and Mission Fund' and payments made by each local church, in a system administered by the Synod as the Treasurer was outlined in the finance report. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are a precious resource to the church – helping to lead local churches, through working with the Elders in a team to enable the church in its life and mission. 4

The denomination, through General Assembly and the Ministries Department, seek to ensure a fair share of minister across all 13 synods, based on the number of members and the number of churches in each synod. A target figure for deployment is therefore produced for each synod.

The target total of **21** full-time equivalent ministers for the end of 2021 is 3.5 ministers lower than our current number of ministers plus vacancies on the list (churches looking for a minister). We have more than our fair share of ministers.

DEPLOYMENT TARGETS	Deployment Target Data in 2021	
	South Western Synod	
	Total Church Members	2762
	Total Churches	105
	FTE stipendiary Ministers	23.05
	FTE Target start 2021	22
	FTE Target start 2022	21

DEPLOYMENT TARGETS	THE PROBLEM	
	South Western Synod	
	Target END 2021	21
	FTE stipendiary Ministers in post	23.05
	Vacancies on list	1.45
	OVERSCOPED NOW	2.5 FTE
	End of year	3.5 FTE

United Reformed Church South Western Synod

Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Meanwhile, across the denomination, there are not enough ministers even to fill the 'fair share' figure for all synods, because the number of ministers retiring each year far outstrips the number of people leaving training. Some synods (like the South Western) have more ministers than our fair share, others have less than their fair share, and the Synod Moderators have therefore decided to ask all Moderators to seek the Moderators meeting's permission before placing new vacancies on the list.

All synods are faced with working towards their target: to reduce 'over scoping', to find ministers for vacancies, and to ensure a fair spread of leadership

Remember that this leadership is not just provided by stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament – there are also non-stipendiary ministers, Church related Community Workers, Local Church Leaders, employed lay workers and in every church a team of ordained Elders.

Many synods are faced with working out how to meet their target: to reduce 'over scoping', to find ministers for vacancies, and to ensure a fair spread of leadership through the churches of the synod. It's important that we remember that this leadership is not just provided by stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament – there are also non-stipendiary ministers, Church related Community Workers, local church leaders, employed lay workers and in every church a team of ordained Elders.

In the South Western Synod

The Synod Pastoral Committee has the task of trying to meet deployment targets and the target has got stricter and stricter each year.

Since 2014, the average number of church members per full-time URC stipendiary minister has been about 140, and Pastoral committee have used this as a rule of thumb for suggesting scoping numbers for vacant churches. At the same time, the Pastoral Committee have not wanted to create ever larger and more geographically spread groups of churches, and so other ways of providing leadership to churches has been explored, including lay leaders, leaders from other denominations, and the service of interim/transition ministers to provide focussed leadership in a time of change.

Over the last five years, some ministers have moved out of the Synod, realising that with falling membership of the churches, or even closure of churches in their pastorate, the scoping level would need to fall. Some ministers have taken on additional churches, making their responsibilities wider. Churches whose ministers have moved or retired have had to change – either through reduced scoping (for example moving from a full-time to a part-time minister, or facing a reduced level of part-time ministry), through a short period of transition ministry, or through forming a joint or group pastorate. None of these changes have been easy – and the demands on churches and ministers have been considerable.

The challenge of meeting deployment targets has been reflected in Pastoral committee reports to Synod over the last five years, and Synod Pastoral Advisors and the Moderator have had conversations with ministers and churches, both in groups and individually, especially in times of change of ministry, but increasingly to try to share knowledge of the situation of decline which is affecting us all.

United Reformed Church South Western Synod

Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

The Pastoral Committee realised in 2019 that we would not be able to reach our target by introducing change only at times when there was a church closure or a minister moving, and that they needed to look in detail at the numbers of ministers, churches, and members, area by area. The Bristol area was looked at first, as there has been very little movement of ministers in the last ten years.

Synod Pastoral Adviser for the Bristol area, Stephen Newell, spoke about the ministers of the Bristol area meeting in October 2019 and how information was shared about decline, scoping targets, and deployment. The ministers were able to meet again on Zoom in October 2020.

The Synod Pastoral Advisors and Moderator looked at the up to-date statistics in detail and contacted each church secretary and each minister in the start of December 2020 to share the difficult conversations which lay ahead and to ask each church to contribute to the discussion.

In January 2021, Pastoral committee looked at the number of members and the current ministry of each church, compared to the 'rule of thumb' figure of 140 members for a full-time stipendiary minister.

THE BRISTOL AREA: Statistics

Pastorate	Minister	Members	Scoping/140
Argyle Morley/Horfield/Nailsea	Rev John Gray	63	45%
Brislington/Whitchurch	Rev Sian Collins	47	33.6%
Hanham/Oldland Common/Wick	Rev James Jang	51	36.5%
Thornbury/Trinity Henleaze	Rev Neil Thorogood	142	101.4%
Redland Park/New Brunswick	Rev Dougie Burnett	87	62.1%
Zion United Church (U Methodist)	Rev Stephen Newell	209	75% URC
Bedminster/Mangotsfield CG/Upton/Kingswood (U Moravian)/B Korean Church	Local leader/Comp Elder/Vacant/Moravian/Special Category	4/23/8/2/60	

After a lot of careful discussion, including any 'special factors' which the churches had shared, the following proposals were agreed:

- To reduce Argyle Morley, Horfield & Nailsea from 100% to 50% scoping from end August 2021.
- To reduce Hanham, Oldland Common & Wick from 100% to 50% scoping from end August 2021. (In each of these cases, emergency funding would be offered to the ministers, if necessary, in September 2021.)
- Brislington & Whitchurch from 50% to 35% scoping from end June 2022, or on minister's retirement if earlier.
- Redland Park/New Brunswick from 100% to 60% from end December 2022 (to allow for increased scoping of +50% at BKC in March 2023).

Note: Zion Frampton Cotterell will receive Methodist ministry from September 2022.

The moderator noted that this information needed to be shared accurately, directly and at the same time with all the affected churches and ministers, and so personal emails were sent to all ministers and letters to all church secretaries, setting out the proposals, but inviting further discussion in the 7 months before any changes are due.

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

The Moderator and Bristol SPAs have been answering questions and talking to Elders meeting and to individuals about the effects of these proposals. However, one set of Elders, who were not able to engage on Zoom, asked to state the following:

The following is sent on behalf of the Elders of Hanham & Oldland URCs.

The proposed decrease in scoping levels and reductions in ministers' stipends from 1st September in the Bristol area, has caused much distress to the elders, as well as to ministers who are to have their stipend reduced by 50%.

Despite assurances from the Pastoral Committee that Ministers were in discussion about scoping levels from November 2013, some Elders in the Bristol Area were totally shocked.

We would like to appeal to the Synod Pastoral Committee to pause this action and engage in a Synod-wide discussion with representatives to consider an alternative solution to the problem.

The Pastoral committee have resolved to provide emergency funding to prevent the hardship of ministers. This was made clear to the ministers affected. For some people discussion about scoping feels like a relatively new thing, but in fact there are records of ministers in the Bristol Area being challenged to move ten years ago, before any of the present members of the Pastoral Committee were in place. Discussion will continue with ministers and churches, face-to-face when that is and the scoping and membership figures will be looked at again as any changes happen. The uncomfortable truth is that while there are more than a fair number of ministers in the Bristol area and not enough ministers in other parts of the United Reformed Church, ministers (who serve the whole URC) may have to move from the Bristol area in order to find full-time scoping.

Recognising that the churches of the Bristol area will need support through these changes, the Pastoral committee are finalising plans for a 50% 'transition minister' post, to provide churches with help as they explore their mission and leadership in new patterns in the future. Phil Nevard and Rob Weston have each been providing this transitional support in Devon for a number of years.

Pastoral committee have already begun discussions about scoping levels in other areas of the Synod. In a declining denomination this is a fact of life. Pastoral committee will continue to try to support the life and mission of the churches of the Synod, and care for the lives of members, elders, leaders, and ministers as they work together in difficult times.

There will continue to be a need for full-time stipendiary ministers in the URC – but we cannot promise any of our ministers that they will be able to stay where they are while the church changes around them. Ministers will need to be flexible and to be prepared to change the shape of their pastorates and even to move across the denomination – some of our ministers in the SW Synod have already done just that, as God has called them to new challenges.

The Moderator then invited the meeting to share their thoughts and concerns about Pastoral Committee's proposals on deployment in the Synod:

John Waine: The elders of Redland Park and New Brunswick URCs are disturbed by the proposed reductions and the effects they will have on the membership of all URCs in the Bristol area. In view of the importance of such a decision we seek a longer period of consultation before a final decision is reached and before any similar changes are rolled out to other districts within the synod.

Stephen Newell [SN]: *We recognise that this is a difficult thing. We have listened to and met with most of the elders [in Bristol area] apart from the two groups who have made statements. Elders are not of one*

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

mind – some comments were that this cannot come as a surprise, we've known for 10 years. Lengthening the process will not make it any easier. In October 2019 there was a meeting with all ministers and were definitely clear about what we were being told about this situation.

We [Stephen and Sue] have been trying to keep talking to the elderships and we can definitely learn from this as we discuss it with the other areas. Agree that that it would not be wise to 'rush into' the other areas.

Phil Nevard: I don't welcome this because it is a consequence of a difficult situation and difficult decisions in the life of the church, but it is a step that we really do need to consider seriously. Up to now this scoping and deployment question has become a real issue for churches that have just become vacant and the way that synods have dealt with it has been good news in that they just don't get a minister. It is an entirely random way to distribute ministers as a resource and has skewed the way ministry is deployed across all synods, it's not just ours.

This seems to me a much more grown up, fairer way of looking at which churches might be affected by this rather than just the ones that happen to have their ministers move on. I welcome the courage of the Pastoral Committee for grasping this – I'm a minister so I am not a turkey voting for Christmas! We're all affected by this. I accepted when I came into this synod, as a clause in my terms of settlement – I agreed that I was willing to be flexible and available in a world that is changing all around me – things have changed massively and significantly in the 8 years that I have been in the synod. I need to be ready for that. I take comfort from the fact that I am in a synod that has demonstrated its pastoral care to its ministers in the past very clearly, so I feel safe despite this being a difficult and challenging decision. I need to be ready.

Mark Woodhouse: I want more information about the support for ministers – I am 50% currently and looking at the stats I'd probably go down to 30%. I've only been here for 2 years and of them has been in lockdown. I've got 7 years to go.

Ruth Whitehead [RW]: *Support would be, for example, a minister who needed to move because the job ended. We kept her 'on the books' so that she was still in receipt of a stipend, for a year, until she found another job. That was particularly difficult because the minister was near to retirement which made it harder.*

It's called 'emergency funding' because ministers can't be expected to move on a whim, particularly in a pandemic, but what we felt was that what these proposals show that when a minister moves the difficulty will come, not in Bristol, but in other parts of the synod when we cannot call a minister into the synod. If you wonder why I didn't talk about this at Synod in October, it wasn't a problem then. The decline has become very rapid. I can see that this might feel very sudden but looking back at Pastoral Committee minutes I can see that we were talking about this in 2007, long before I came and then it was recognised that there was going to be a problem. And that was when Pastoral Committee began addressing the issue as randomly as when a minister moved on. So, what we have ended up with is a lot of ministers in one part of the synod and obviously we need to look at the whole synod. I am asking ministers to keep talking to us, it is March, nothing is changing until September, and there is emergency funding beyond that. We are not talking in general about making general changes, we are talking about making specific changes [in Bristol]. In other areas we will start that conversation earlier and talking about specific changes, earlier.

Mark Woodhouse: It has only been 2 years, and I came down here for 50%. In URC for 20 years and always been talking about scoping so it's no surprise.

RW: *I can see why we are talking about different things in different areas. There will be a conversation with you and there is already a date in the diary for a meeting.*

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Dougie Burnett: I am one of those affected by these proposals. Thanks to Sue and Ruth for the conversations which have been helpful for understanding the bigger picture but that is not to say that having received that email at the beginning of February was a huge shock. We all recognise the need for change and that change is happening but to be told that you are going to lose 40% of your scoping [and 40% of stipend] and the hit that will have on pensions is a huge shock. Helen and I are both ministers. My pastorate has made this statement about seeking a longer period of consultation before a final decision is made. While recognising that it can't be forever it is about everyone adjusting and trying to find a better way of through than simply slashing stipends, reducing pastorates to part time, because we do feel that at New Brunswick and Redland Park there are other opportunities there and we would dearly like time to work that through. We're grateful for actual physical meeting at the end of May but hope that it really does mean that it means discussion and dialogue rather than a fait accompli being reinforced.

RW: *A reminder that the reduction at Redland Park and New Brunswick will happen at the end of September 2022.*

SN: *This has been the most the most difficult situation for Ruth, and I would ask you to pray for Ruth, as she gets it from both sides, both the churches who haven't been able to be on the vacancy list, and our colleagues as well, it feels horrible. I am encouraged by the meetings we have had with elders – it's not been easy, the elders have told us things pretty straight, but there has been some good. I look forward to further discussions.*

As ministers, the problem is that the system that we have is not meeting the needs of the churches that as we are now. We may want it to be different, and I certainly want it to be different, but we have to face this reality and it is frightening. I am affected. It is difficult for all of us. Actually, the needs of the churches and indeed the needs of the kingdom, I hope that we will find some better ways to do that which we are as a church. Whether that meets the needs of us as ministers could be difficult.

Tracey Lewis: This is really, really hard, but the truth is things are changing and we have to change too. North West Synod have done a complete restructure and have pastorates with 19, 20, 22 churches with 3 ministers – huge pastorates. They have had the conversation about what we want a minister for - the role of a minister has had to change dramatically; it is profoundly difficult. We are in a difficult situation.

Andrew Hayden: Devastating effect these proposals will have on the ministers in the Bristol area. They are expected to take drop to 50% stipend. Emergency funding - first time we have had it explained and it's not clear how long it will last. Reducing of the scoping in these pastorates to part time means that they will stay part time pastorates as combining pastorates is not an option. The dual dilemma is that you are making current ministers impoverished and leaving the pastorate without full time ministry and they have a stark choice of staying in the URC and remaining impoverished or leaving the URC ministry and leaving us without ministry and oversight in these pastorates. And all the time with no prospect of engaging a full-time minister – it seems counter intuitive.

RW: *The problem is that in Bristol there are too many ministers, that is why we cannot make larger pastorates in Bristol. Other forms of leadership – the other churches in Bristol who don't have a minister have other forms of leadership, so we don't have churches that we can add to a pastorate. We have churches in Devon who don't have a minister, but we can't say to a minister in Bristol get in your car and travel to your other church in Devon as well. So, what we need is movement. We are certainly not trying to impoverish anybody and what we are doing is being realistic about what can be done across the whole Bristol area. How much scoping there can be and then if none of the current ministers are prepared to move, we would have to reduce their stipend. Of course, if ministers moved that would enable new,*

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

flexible working arrangements to happen as we have heard about in the North West. But what couldn't happen in the North West was if you had 10 churches that each had their own minister you said well that's a group of 10 with 10 ministers because that doesn't solve your problem of having too many ministers in one place. Currently we can't declare any more vacancies in Devon or anywhere else until we've reduced the total number of ministers in the Synod.

I'm not asking ministers to leave the URC ministry, but Pastoral Committee is asking those ministers if they want to stay in Bristol, all of them, there must be a reduction in stipend. If some of them move from Bristol, then of course there will need to be a discussion about how we share the ministry that we have got there. But it is the problem that as Tracey said in the North West there are large groups of churches that should have 3 or 4 ministers and currently only have 1 or maybe 2 because ministers are not in the right place. So, I know this sounds brutal and these recommendations have hit people hard but that is why we have been having the discussion gently but firmly over a number of years. The difficulty has come because we really have reached the point where we can't wait for people to decide it's time to move. We have to give the challenge to the ministers in Bristol that there are too many stipendiary ministers in Bristol. Once there is some movement, we will be able to look at different ways of providing ministry.

Helen Pattie [and David]: I've had 8 pastorates over a 30-35-year ministry. The movement from pastorate to pastorate is something I've never found easy, uprooting, and moving. It's not something I've wished to do but I've followed God and I've been open to that but he's not saying that but yet you have placed the sword of Damocles over my head today, in fact over my head for several months. I am not seeing God in this, at all, this is untenable, what you are doing to people who have given up everything to follow and to move in this way. If I was a church member, and I think it will happen in Bristol, I would be moving. I don't recognise this as the URC I came to in good faith. But if we are at this point, and I do recognise that you are doing tough things, if we are truly at this point as a URC not only in the South West but throughout there needs to be a bigger conversation. Because this pain is going to be like an open wound that goes on for the next decade. We don't have sitting in front of us the option for continued ecumenical joining - that conversation has now gone. We need a conversation that is what is God saying about the future of the entire URC? You cannot do this to its servants you need to say - where are we going, or are we not to go forward anymore? Have we to find an honourable way out for those who have served. You're going to come to me: Helen you have to move, or your job goes in its entirety. So, I now face the end of ministry and find a way of living because I can't take, in physicalness take on a move, I don't have the health for that. That is what you are saying to ministers and your health will give for many people. Who is going to be bold enough to have the big conversation and say do we have a future, or do we need an ark, and do we need to face up to decline is coming like a truck at us? And it is painful and it is hard and I am saying find us an ark because this is not an answer this is a death by many cuts and I am someone who believes and trusts in God with 100% and every fibre of my being, and if you're now doing this, and the reason you're doing this I understand, but this is where we're now at and we'll roll it out then there is more happening here than solving some scoping in our Synod.

Who will take the conversation forward, where do we need to take the conversation forward to because this is untenable, and we cannot live with health in this situation? Where do we go to as a Synod, who do we go to next? I'm not looking at you Ruth I'm saying where do we go to next?

Who's going to listen – is it the General Secretary? Who's going to listen because if you continue along this line then you are calling all our ministry into disrepute, we cannot hold our heads up in the public for a

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

denomination that is doing this to its people. I've worked for 50% before, I've done it because, personal choice at a time when that's all I could give. This is not, I'm not feeling God in this, I'm not seeing scripture that relates to this. If this is where we are now at who is going to take the big conversation forward because this not just an issue for the South West Synod? This is an issue for the URC, and do we have a future or is it time to find the ark and gift our gifting on and find a way and find a way that ministers can step back with honour and to be provided for. And not to find themselves with no support, no pension, no way forward – we can't function like this. It's not possible and it's not of God.

RW: *I urge everybody to read Mission Council paper A1 which the General Secretary is already preparing to bring a proposal to General Assembly exactly to look at the future of the denomination. But we cannot wait as a Synod for that to happen because we've got vacant churches that at the moment cannot go on the vacancy list until we get some sort of change. This illustrates exactly why we are not doing this to the whole synod, we're doing this area by area because there will always be reasons why, for particular ministers, movements are not possible, and we have not been and won't be specific about emergency funding because you don't know how long an emergency will go on for. So emergency funding is there for somebody who needs it while that emergency is in place.*

There are plenty of jobs for stipendiary ministers in the URC at the moment but not in the SW Synod, Bristol. We will come to Somerset, Helen and David are in the Somerset area. We have already begun a gentle conversation with ministers, and that conversation will continue area by area and Somerset will not be having their discussion immediately because we are still looking for a SPA for the Somerset area.

SN: *It breaks our hearts to hear this, especially from a colleague, and it makes us ask is God in this? Ask the question by saying is God in this by saying we've had two ministers come out of training this year – in a sense Helen is right because no one is coming forward for training because it's such an unsure job. We've all been in this situation, how many of us expected that the URC would still be in existence in 2021? Especially in 2021 after the year we have just had. There's uncertainty for all of us. It's really hard and the difficulty for us as ministers is, we get that this is hard, we gave our life to God - and that's not an easy thing to have done. But ultimately that is not the issue – us having jobs, the issue is the church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. There probably will be good things that come out of the pandemic that we didn't expect. The needs of the church in Bristol area are not all around the full-time ministers...the needs of those churches are probably best met with a whole different range of help. It's difficult for us as full-time ministers.... but we are a people of God, we are Abraham in Ur and we're like "you really want me to set off?" It's not easy.*

Aiyana Gardner- Houghton: I am a minister in my first year of being ordained. I want to say my support for Ruth and the [Pastoral] Committee, it's important to say that people are doing such hard things. It's harder for some than others, what's being received now. I'd like to think if someone came knocking at my door saying your ministry is 20%, I might kick and scream – hand on heart I don't know what I'd do but I can't say that I don't see God in this, because we need change, not for the sake of us ministers but for the sake of those we serve, and our hearts has to be for those people. Right now, we need to unite and support those who are trying to work for change because it is heartbreaking. Also, people coming out of ministry in the last year – I have colleagues in the North west and one colleague in a new situation, recently ordained, dealing with 4 churches and that's not easy too. We are all going to have to face some pretty horrible stuff and I hope that we can do it together.

Lythan Nevard: The scripture that has come to mind for me is 1 Corinthians where it talks about the body of Christ. And I see this in loads of different ways. Firstly, the acceptance as the body of Christ – the body

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

of Christ together and that means as a synod we have a responsibility to each other and as churches within the denomination we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters across the whole denomination but if we hold on to the stipendiary ministry that we have there are other places that will not have ministry at all. And it's really hard when you are used to a certain level of ministry to give some of that up but in a sense, we are trying to share it equally with others. I see the body of Christ as well as thinking about those parts of the body that might be in pain and as a synod from what I've heard we are receptive, and we hear the voices of those parts that are in pain and we want to try and help them and support them and heal as much as possible. Also, the body of Christ imagery comes with that reminder about all the different gifts that there are within the church and we have been blessed as a denomination the way that we formed ourselves we have been served with stipendiary ministers and others and the shape is getting different. There are some churches now in the synod who say if we have a little bit of supervision from a minister, we don't need a stipendiary minister. We need that encouragement and support, but we don't need someone who we say, 'this is our minister'. All of us have callings and giftings, in the South West when a church is vacant the Moderator and SPA will come with a whole raft of different ideas for how we can provide leadership in each church. We have Elders who are in leadership and ministry and they are ordained to each local church as well. In the South West we have a whole range of opportunities, some financial, some training, we have Stepwise now, a new way of training Assembly accredited Lay Preachers. This whole raft of people together to be the body of Christ to do mission and to serve our local support body of communities. I hear the pain, but I want to encourage us - God has work for us to do and I pray that he will help to shape the body of Christ here as the URC nationally.

Patsy: I have a negative story that has turned into a positive. My church took on a minister from the URC whose wife was a URC minister in Manchester, and he couldn't get a post in Manchester so he applied to us and we have taken him on – he must have been serving us for over five and a half years and he's going to retire as a Moravian minister, and he's been a real blessing to our congregations.

RW: *Other denominations serving us.*

Neil Thorogood: I arrived in the midst of this story and am conscious of the pain and hurt and am grateful that I am part of synod that hears this and am part of the conversation. I wear a few scars – I was principal of a college, working well and generating quite a few students for URC. Conscious that there is moment in the life of the URC when it feels like us and them – some making life hard for some and not others. There is only us, and it is important to recognise that those who are serving in our structures are doing so because God has called them to do so and now is a really hard time to serve in an elders' meeting or indeed to be in ministry. Am grateful we're trying to hold this together - the pain is real for us all.

I would like to reflect on the seasons. I left Westminster college and returned to a pastorate because I had a profound sense that God was saying to me that this season of your ministry has come to an end. New season needs you enter. Tough season in the life of our denomination We didn't create this situation in a situation has come upon us much like the pandemic or war declared. Didn't go looking for this God is saying Together find across denomination walk into this season with same sense of faithfulness like our predecessors..... it's a blessing to hear.

The meeting then divided into break out rooms where the following questions were considered:

- 1. What three things does your church most need from a leader?**
- 2. Which of those things are only doable by a minister of Word and Sacrament?**
- 3. What 'other' forms of leadership has your church experienced?**

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 97th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March 2021

Answers to these questions were emailed to the Synod Clerk who collated the information for discussion at Pastoral Committee.

The meeting continued with a video from Flavel URC, Dartmouth showing how one church in the Synod had faced being a disciple in a time of Covid.

The Moderator closed the meeting with prayer.

Gwen Jennings, Synod Clerk
March 2021

***Minutes amended on 01/09/21 to include content of the discussion on the floor of the meeting. Gwen Jennings*