

United Reformed Church South Western Synod

Minutes of the 96th meeting of the Synod held via Zoom on Saturday 17th October 2020

Attendance:

74 people attended: 30 church representatives, 23 serving ministers, 3 local church leader, 7 retired ministers, 9 synod officers/staff and 2 visitors. There were 17 apologies: 6 church representatives, 3 serving ministers, 2 retired ministers, 1 Local Church Leader, 5 Synod officer/ staff. Apologies for absence received by Synod Office and Synod Clerk.

Opening worship was led by the Revd. Dr Susan Durber who spoke about the trauma experienced by everyone since March and how the isolation was the hardest thing to bear. We were invited to light a candle to remember loved ones and light the screen of our laptops so that we could see God's light shining and remember that the we are not alone.

The Moderator remembered those who had died since we last met:

Revd (Agnes) Sheila Dickson

Revd John Ward

Revd Gwyneth Jones

Revd Margaret Howard

Mr David Pickard

Mr Ernest Gudgeon

Mrs Madge Sutton

Mrs Maggie Field

Revd Peter Newell

Mrs Sue Vickery

Mrs Gretel Cohen

Mr Edward (Ted) Price

Mrs Joan Gunn

Mr John Lloydlangston

Mrs Judith White

The Moderator constituted the Synod, the theme of the meeting being: ***"Supporting one another in times of pandemic"***.

Minutes of the last Synod held in October 2019 [March 2020 cancelled] were **AGREED**.

Synod welcomed the following:

New URC Minsters:

Revd Aiyana Gardner-Houghton: newly ordained minister. Commenced at Heavitree & Pinhoe on 1st July 2020.

Revd Neil Thorogood: moved into the Synod from Westminster College to serve at Thornbury & Trinity-Henleaze from 1st Sept 2020.

Revd Bill Thomas: moved into the Synod from West Midlands Synod

New Methodist Ministers:

Revd Dr Peggy Kabonde: Methodist minister commenced at Bradford on Avon, Melksham and Whitley from September 2020.

Revd Pam Stranks: Methodist minister commenced at Bromham, Calne and Corsham, St Aldhelm's from September 2020. (Replaces Revd Wendy Tucker)

Retired Ministers Moving into the Synod:

Revd Edmund Fallows: retired minister moved into the Synod from North Western Synod at the end of March 2020.

Revd Clare Callanan: moved into the Synod from Southern Synod August 2020. Formerly Chaplain to Blind Veterans.
 Revd Simon Ellis: retired minister moved into the Synod from East Midlands Synod at the end of September 2020.
Changes within the Synod

Jonathan Oliverio: ended role as Synod Pastoral Advisor for East & South Devon Area in March 2020
 Revd Jim Thorneycroft: appointed as Synod Pastoral Advisor for East & South Devon Area from 1st July 2020
 David Hayden: retired at the end of August 2020 after serving as Trust Officer for 28 years.
 Revd Roy Lowes (Rtd): appointed as Stepwise Advocate for the Synod from 5th October 2020.

Church changes

Seend Methodist church in the United Area closed in March 2020.

Moving out of the Synod

Revd Jeffrey Armitstead (Rtd): Jeff and Connie moved to West Yorkshire in August 2020
 Revd Michael Pevy (Rtd): Michael and June moved to Derbyshire in August 2020.

MISSION COUNCIL MATTERS

- Rules of procedure for virtual attendance: it was explained that the Standing Orders for virtual meetings had been produced and agreed at Mission Council 2020. Churches are required to follow the procedures when holding their usual church meetings via virtual means. Alternatively, the Standing Orders for physical meetings still apply.
- Safeguarding Strategic Plan: In October 2020 the United Reformed Church held a Safeguarding Symposium to launch its five-year Safeguarding Strategic Plan. The publication of GP 5 is a major update of Good Practice – Safeguarding Children and Young People in the Church, 4th edition, reflecting substantial developments in safeguarding over the past few years. The take home message is 'Saefguarding is everyone's responsibility'. Further information is available on the URC website at: <https://urc.org.uk/good-practice-policy-and-procedures>.

FINANCE:

Synod Trust Budget 2019 - 22 Budget Summary (in 1000s)

Category	2019	2020	2021	2022
Staff	284	282	288	295
Grants	195	195	150	150
Synod activities	27	27	27	27
Other	86	82	82	82
Total expenditure	592	586	547	554
Total income	586	566	551	551
Surplus/deficit	6	-10	4	-7

The finances of the South Western Synod are in a healthy state with plenty of assets. Several large and small Enabling grants have been approved but due to the current situation, applications have reduced. Churches are encouraged to apply for Enabling grants to support mission projects as they adapt to new ways of being church in the coming months.

Full details of the income and expenditure are contained in the finance report [PowerPoint version] on the website.

Synod Trust and Fossil Fuels:

Mission Council meeting in May 2019 passed a resolution asking all bodies within the URC to remove from their investments any companies that are significantly involved in Fossil Fuel extraction. CCLA's Ethical Investment Fund no longer holds any companies which derive significant earnings from involvement with Fossil Fuels. M&G does not have any similar commitments.

The Mission Council cannot dictate to local churches but the Synod urges all churches that hold investments to examine their holdings and determine whether they are consistent with Mission Council's request. Please speak to the Synod Treasurer if you have any questions about this. The facts are:

- M&G Charifund receives around 14% of its income from Fossil Fuel companies.
- CCLA's Charity Investment fund receives around 5% of its income from Fossil Fuel companies. Many local churches still use these Investment funds.

Inter-synod resource sharing

We propose for 2020 to contribute to resource sharing of £25,000. This is an increase of £5,000 due to needs of other Synods who are significantly less well-resourced than we are.

Ministry & Mission [M&M]:

We exceeded our pledge in 2019; 20 churches paid additional contributions. We hope to meet our 2020 pledge, but it is likely to require a contribution from Synod funds. A number of churches have suspended or reduced their contributions due to loss of income. Whilst recognising the pressures on some churches who rely heavily on income from lettings, thanks were offered to the churches that meet, and in some cases exceed, their agreed commitment.

Resolution 1: The South Western Synod of the URC agrees the factors quoted as the rates to be used for the calculation of the 2021 M&M Local Church Guided Contribution and commits to a total giving of £1,230,000 to the M&M fund.

This was **AGREED** with no abstentions.

Deputy Treasurer:

A Deputy Treasurer is being sought to take over a part of the role previously undertaken by David Hayden. This will mainly focus upon the management of Investments held by the local churches and the Synod Trust. It is expected that the role will include membership of the Finance Committee. Further information can be obtained from the Synod Treasurer, Revd Dick Gray, if you are interested in this role or know someone who might be.

Pensions situation update:

The URC operates 2 Pension Funds: The Lay staff Pensions fund and Ministers' Pension fund. Both are Defined Benefit pension schemes and the Lay Scheme is broadly in balance with the liabilities matching the assets held. The Ministers Pension scheme was almost in balance when last measured in 2017. However, the Pensions Regulator wishes Pension Schemes to rely less on risky assets. This is likely to cause the fund to be around £30Million in deficit at the end of 2020. The URC has to find a solution to the need for additional funds to meet the regulator's requirements. Assuming that all Synods agree to assisting in meeting this demand, this Synod and its Trust are likely to need to contribute some £3 million to the fund.

We are also likely to need to allocate some assets to support the risks that we need to take to obtain a reasonable income. These costs are to meet the benefits already earned. The URC may consider whether to change the Pension arrangements for the future. Further details will emerge in 2021 and any ensuing decisions will be dealt with as the need arises.

ANNUAL DATA:

Resolution 2. 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** with no abstentions.

NOMINATIONS LIST: amendments received up to 16th October have been actioned. The list is on the website.

Resolution 3: Synod accepts the nominations listed, with thanks to all those who have agreed to serve.

This was **AGREED** with no abstentions.

Moderator of General Assembly – nominations for 2022-2023 are now requested from churches. Further information is on the main URC website and nomination forms are available from the Synod Clerk.

COFFEE BREAK 11.00 – 11.25

BREAK OUT ROOMS: Delegates re-joined the meeting in break out rooms where they discussed the following:

1. How has life been for you and your church since March 2020?
2. What helped?
3. What support do you need from Synod?

Feedback from the break-out groups has been collated and is summarised as follows:

What Help do you need?

- Support for ministers and leaders, both from within the church and also those around them in their families, is likely to be an important element in enabling them to avoid burn-out and keep going through what is likely to be a period of uncertainty.
- More generally, there is likely to be the need for honest and difficult conversations about the nature of the church, going forward.
- Synod 'forum' for discussion about priorities and direction ... sharing ideas, 'discerning' together, supporting one another with a 'collective wisdom' conversation.
- Some sparks of hope for churches (especially if there is another deeper lockdown in the SW).
- What would really help is more cross fertilisation of ideas about how to connect to the wider community; how do we do outreach, service to the community, ecumenism well in what is looking like a long time to come.
- Practical worship issues – many local preachers and retired ministers have decided to stop preaching at the moment and some for good.
- Maybe could have worship leading via Zoom – or recording services for others. Can have guest preachers!
- Some churches will need financial help, but mostly we are concerned about how to do things differently...
- Use enabling grants to provide equipment.
- Financial understanding of the difficulties small churches are experiencing in meeting M&M contributions is appreciated and hope that will continue as income is projected to remain very low in the foreseeable future with no lettings to help. Agreement to future reduced contributions needed.
- Would it be possible to have a list of folks who could help out technically? [just to get advice].
- An idiot's guide to technology remembering various forms
- List of churches who need help with technology and a list of people able to help

This summary will be examined by the relevant committees to consider a coordinated response.

Back together – there were video presentations from Revd Paul Stokes, minister of Plymstock United Church in Plymouth and Revd Gary Gotham, Minister of 4 churches in rural and market town of Wiltshire and Chair of Wiltshire United Area - an area of ecumenical cooperation which has 18 Methodist, United and United Reformed Churches. They each spoke about what they and their congregations had been doing during lockdown and beyond and what the future holds. The message was clear - we need to consider what Gospel values speak louder now than they did before and what parts of discipleship must adapt. We will never go back to how it was, in the same way that we have never returned to the trends and forms of any other past era.

Both videos are uploaded to the Synod website <https://www.urcsouthwest.org.uk/synod-news/>

Closing prayer. The Moderator thanked all those involved with preparing and organising the meeting and those who spoke and all who were able to attend our first virtual Synod. We were reminded that this situation is far from over and we need to learn from the early church described in the book of Acts. We need to be flexible, but focussed on discipleship.

The meeting ended a 12.45 pm.

Gwen Jennings
Synod Clerk

GJ 25.10.20