

United Reformed Church South Western Synod DRAFT
Minutes of the 103rd Meeting of the Synod held on Saturday 9th March 2024

ATTENDANCE: 61 people attended. 33 people in person, 28 via Zoom. From the room 9 Serving Ministers, 8 Church Representatives, 4 Retired Ministers, 11 Office Staff and 1 visitor. On Zoom 6 Serving Ministers, 3 Retired Ministers and 19 Church Representatives.

Revd Gerald England constituted the 103rd meeting of Synod. Apologies for absence received via the Synod Office. There would be an audio recording for the Minutes.

MOVEMENT OF MINISTERS - Report attached. The Jubilee Ministers to be celebrated at the Meeting were Revd Anthony Coates, Revd Adrian Phippen and Revd Brian Ranford.

WELCOME to those attending for the first time.

OPENING WORSHIP was led by Revd Roy Lowes.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - Report attached.

The specific areas of work since the last report included reflection upon the Synod Gathering in October 2023 where the overwhelming feedback showed people greatly appreciated the chance to gather in person and to have a wide range of input which highlighted opportunities and possibilities for local churches.

The Executive wishes to record thanks to Revd Steve Faber (Moderator of West Midlands Synod) who has offered advice and acted as “Moderator-on-call” and to Revd Roy Lowes who has attended the monthly Moderators’ Meetings to keep our Synod properly connected to wider URC networks. Revd Roy Lowes is also welcomed as convenor of the Synod Pastoral Committee and thus onto the Synod Executive Committee.

The Executive have approved a new limited term IT support role to oversee the IT requirements of the Synod office.

The Executive have been dealing with the consequences of Church closures during the last year and a number of URC SW Synod ministers and churches have faced great challenges. On the financial side sales of buildings, both churches and manses, provide resources for enabling grants, eco grants and facelift grants within the Synod. This also helps to support the wider church through inter Synod resource sharing and contributions to the Ministers’ Pension Fund.

A small group was convened to review the role of Synod Pastoral Advisers. In the light of their Report, received in February, and subsequent discussion at both Synod Executive Committee Meeting and Discipleship & Service Committee Meeting, the Executive has agreed to some follow up actions and the Discipleship and Service Committee has prepared a resolution for Synod to consider. (Resolution to be considered later in the Meeting at the end of the Pastoral Committee Report).

There was one resolution attached to the above Synod Executive Report as follows:

Resolution 1

This meeting of the South Western Synod of the United Reformed Church warmly thanks and affirms the Synod Pastoral Advisers for their support and guidance offered to local churches, ministers, elders and others, appreciating especially their extra work whilst the Synod awaits the appointment of a new Moderator.

AGREED

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FINANCE - Report attached.

- **M&M** – The M&M pledge for 2023 was £1,100,000. The Synod Treasurer thanked all churches for their M&M contributions in 2023 and particularly to those that increased contributions by the 1% requested and to those who gave considerably more. The M&M Pledge for 2024 is £1,114,759. This is an agreement to help the central URC cover its costs.
- **Feasibility Grants** - The Synod is planning to increase Feasibility grants from 50% to 90%. The maximum grant will be £20,000. Grants to be offered to make buildings more eco friendly.
- **Manses** - The Synod is looking into the possibility of taking on responsibility for all Manses at some point in the future to free up time and resources for local churches.
- **Retired Ministers' Pension Fund** – We have paid £1.1 million to the Retired Ministers' Pension Fund. Our outstanding liability is now £1,150,000.
- **Balance Sheet** – current net assets amount to £20,846,542. Stocks and shares have performed well over the last year.
- **The Full Cost of Ministry.** The full cost of a Stipendiary Minister, excluding housing, is £43,000.

CRANBROOK UPDATE

Revd Jon Holder (Anglican Minister currently serving at Cranbrook) and Revd Paul Snell (County Ecumenical Officer for Devon and a member of the Management Group at Cranbrook) gave an update on the story so far of this special ecumenical project on the eastern edge of Exeter in Devon. There are currently between 7000 - 8000 residents in Cranbrook but this could increase to around 20,000 at the completion of the development. It is an area which has the second highest number of under 5s per household in the country. All the denominations involved (Anglican, Methodist and URC) are totally committed to the partnership but it is set up as a special partnership rather than as the traditional LEP. Lythan Nevard, a URC Minister previously employed in the South Western Synod, carried out great work in the community, establishing networks and contributing to the development of the Primary School. Youth Groups, Youth Projects and Toddler groups are very well attended. The Church is flourishing but a separate building is needed for worship – currently the School is used for this. A plot of land has been allocated with planning permission but help from all the denominations is needed to turn the vision to reality and construct a fit- for- purpose building. Conversations with an architect are due to start in the next couple of weeks.

Jon opened the floor to questions. The possibility of the URC offering a Feasibility Grant (90% covered by the URC) to progress work on the building of a Church was raised. The Synod Treasurer was happy to put this proposal to the Synod Executive Committee. A vote with cards took place and showed there was unanimous approval for this idea, as a positive way of showing our support and commitment to this exciting project.

DISCIPLESHIP AND SERVICE COMMITTEE – Report attached.

No questions arose from the Report. Neil Thorogood, as Convenor of the Discipleship and Service Committee, drew the attention of the meeting to the 2 Resolutions printed at the end of the Report, these were Resolutions to enable conversations to happen around the staffing of Synod and issues arising from the gap created by the absence of a Moderator. The Resolutions would be voted on during the Pastoral Committee item on the Meeting Agenda.

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Neil then asked asked Revd Tracey Lewis to report on Interfaith Matters followed by Revd Roy Lowes with a report on Stepwise.

INTERFAITH

Tracey is the Interfaith Advocate for the Committee and is also a member of the URC Interfaith Network. The Interfaith Network is a charitable organisation which has been running for 40 years. Its major source of funding has been a Government Grant. However, due to the Interfaith Network's involvement with the Muslim Council of Britain the Government funding has been withdrawn. The Network cannot continue its work without this funding and its efforts supporting faith groups and promoting peace and justice will come to an end. This is happening at a local level too with the withdrawal of funding from Devon Interfaith. Tracey asked for prayers from the Synod as conversations begin about the way forward for the Interfaith Network.

STEPWISE

Stepwise continues to connect people across the Synod with Groups running in Cricklade, Haydon Wick and Bristol. Rachel Leach and Roy Lowes are in conversation about running a Zoom Stepwise Group to be accessed from anywhere in the Synod. Possible dates for starting this are Tuesday 13th May or Tuesday 18th June 2024 and publicity will be coming out shortly. The small cost of this to be underwritten by the Synod; if help is needed accessing Zoom or there are other online concerns please contact Roy Lowes.

GREEN APOSTLES UPDATE - Report Attached

There are currently 2 Green Apostles in the Synod – Revd Robert Weston and Revd Chris Baillie. The Synod is making good progress in becoming more environmentally aware. 45% of Churches are working towards Eco Church Awards. 19 Churches have achieved Bronze Medal, 9 Silver Medal and 1 gold medal. Each Church has been through the process of looking at their lifestyle, land, buildings etc in an environmental way. Grants are available for much of the work involved, with the Synod offering a generous 50% grant scheme for eco projects. We all need to reduce our energy use and carbon footprint. Simple measures can be taken such as installing bird and bat boxes or bug hotels. More Green Apostles are needed to cover the wide Synod area so if you would be interested in joining the team please contact Rob or Chris.

The following 3 part Resolution was put to the Synod Meeting:

Resolution 2

This meeting of the URC SW Synod:

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| A. Adopts the updated Environmental Policy | AGREED |
| B. Encourages all churches to register with the Eco Church Award scheme and to work through the awards from Bronze to Gold | AGREED, 1 OBJECTION |
| C. Commends the 50% eco grant scheme (25% for LEP) to all Churches and encourages applications, which can be used to reduce carbon emissions or increase biodiversity | AGREED |

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PASTORAL COMMITTEE

Chris Baillie has retired as Chair of the Meetings and Roy Lowes has taken over as Convenor and Chair and is acting as Line Manager for the SPAs. Various questions arising over developments in the work and responsibilities of the SPAs led to a small group being convened to review the role of Synod Pastoral Advisers. In the light of their Report, it was agreed by the Discipleship & Service Committee that the time was right for the Synod to explore if our current pattern and level of Synod roles to support and resource local congregations is appropriate.

The Resolution was then put to the meeting:

Resolution 3

- 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. **AGREED**
- 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. **AGREED**

The Pastoral Committee welcomed those new to Synod including Jess Gough who was attending via zoom and has been elected as the South Western Synod Representative to the URC Youth Executive.

The Pastoral Committee offered thanks to those leaving roles or taking retirement. Revd Helena McKinnon, who is now taking retirement, was present at the meeting was thanked personally for her long period of ministerial service to the URC. Other retirements within the Synod – Beverley and Charlie Stockley, Local Church Leaders at Teignmouth URC, Revd Henriette Wentink who has resigned from the Roll of Ministers, Revd Don Macalister who is retiring from Barnstaple UM and oversight at Muddiford URC, Colin Bowden has retired from the role of Secretary to the South Western Synod Listed Buildings Advisory Committee (LBAC).

Churches that have closed since the last meeting are Bedminster, Teignmouth and Christ Church Ilfracombe. Highworth and Swindon Immanuel have now amalgamated.

The Nominations for Lay Presidency, the General Assembly and Synod were approved by the Meeting.
AGREED

CLOSING WORSHIP was led by Revd Neil Thorogood, including In Memoriam (list attached).

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