

United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 102nd Meeting of the Synod held on Saturday 21st October 2023

ATTENDANCE: 82 people attended: 17 church representatives, 17 serving ministers, 1 CRCW, 8 retired ministers, 10 synod officers/staff and 29 visitors. There were 49 apologies: 24 church representatives, 3 serving ministers, 2 LCLs, 13 retired ministers, 2 synod officers/staff and 5 visitors.

Revd Neil Thorogood constituted the 102nd 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.

WELCOME to those attending for the first time.

OPENING WORSHIP was led by Revd Neil Thorogood.

WORKSHOPS – several workshops were conducted by people from around the Synod. All were well attended and appreciated. Thanks to all Workshop Leaders.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - Report attached

PASTORAL COMMITTEE - Report Attached

DISCIPLESHIP & SERVICE including Making Christ Visible update (Report Attached).

Revd Tracey Lewis – spoke on the current situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and proposed the following Resolution:

The United Reformed Church South Western Synod expresses concern and condemns all acts of violence and retaliation. We stand for peace and unity and pray for the victims of the attacks in Israel and Palestinian victims caught in the violent crossfire of retaliation. We echo the words of our Christian siblings – The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem: As custodians of the Christian faith, deeply rooted in the Holy Land, we stand in solidarity with the people of this region, who are enduring the devastating consequences of continued strife. Our faith, which is founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ, compels us to advocate for the cessation of all violent and military activities that bring harm to both Palestinian and Israeli civilians ... It is our fervent hope and prayer that all parties involved will heed this call for an immediate cessation of violence. We implore political leaders and authorities to engage in sincere dialogue, seeking lasting solutions that promote justice, peace and reconciliation for the people of this land, who have endured the burdens of conflict for too long.

AGREED

Local Churches encouraged to discuss this topic. Agreed that the Synod (Revd Tracey Lewis) will send a copy of the Resolution to every Member of Parliament in the South Western region and also to the Prime Minister.

EM2 - Revd Aiyana Gardner-Houghton was presented with her EM2 certificate.

FINANCE - Report attached.

Report delivered by Revd Dick Gray. Synod finances are very healthy, with current assets of £17 million. There is continued income from the sale of redundant churches and manses. As requested of all Synods by central URC, substantial contributions (total of £3 million) are being made to the pension fund for ministers, which was in significant deficit at the point of closure. In response to the question regarding whether more financial support could be given to increasing the number of

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ministers, possibly from overseas, it was explained that the problem is not lack of funds but lack of people wishing to become ministers, although more ministers than previously are coming in from overseas and other denominations. Copies of the booklet entitled "The United Reformed Church: A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads" available at Synod. Comment made that the central church is clear that the resources held by the denomination are targeted to support the local churches.

Resolution: The South Western Synod of the United Reformed Church agrees with the factors quoted as the rates to use for the calculation of the 2024 Ministry & Mission (M&M) Local Church Guided Contribution and we further commit to the centre to produce an income of £1,100,000. Ministerial true cost will be £43,000. **AGREED**

Grants and Loans: In order to assist churches in caring for their buildings, the level of property grants is to be increased – details as per report. All churches are responsible for arranging a quinquennial survey (ie every 5 years) to ensure continued eligibility for property grants. In response to a query on the installation of solar panels on manse roofs, it was explained that solar panels may be permissible but would depend on the aspect of the roof to ensure viability.

Closing Worship was led by Revd Gerald England and included In Memoriam:
Mr Tony Prescott - died 7th July 2023. Former Church Secretary at Bedminster.
Mrs Olive Kemp - died 18th August 2023. Widow of the late Revd Norman Kemp and mother of Revd Elizabeth Kemp (Rtd).
Mr David Lee - died 3rd September 2023. Former Elder at Exmouth Glenorchy.

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MOVEMENT OF MINISTERS

MOVING INTO THE SYNOD – WELCOME

Revd Jessica Ashcroft-Townsley - moved into the Synod from the USA in June and commenced at Dawlish and Kingsteignton on a Certificate of Limited Service, with an associated Synod role.

Mrs Claire Partridge - commenced as Synod Safeguarding Officer in August 2023

Revd Yohan Song - commenced at Bristol Korean Church

NEW METHODIST MINISTERS

Revd Stephen Caddick - commenced at Branton, Christ Church in September 2023

Revd Sharon Lovelock - commenced at Frampton Cotterell in September 2023

NEW BAPTIST MINISTERS

Revd Andy Pearce - commenced at Locking Castle in April 2023

NEW LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS

Revd David Jewell - commenced at Wrington, Winscombe and Nailsea in July 2023

MOVING OUT OF THE SYNOD

Revd Dr John Burgess (Rtd) - moved to West Midlands Synod July 2023

Revd Susan Durber (Rtd) - moved to National Synod of Wales March 2023

Revd Rowena Francis (Rtd) - moved to West Midlands Synod July 2023

Revd Peter Henderson (Rtd) - moved to Eastern Synod June 2023

Revd Vivien Henderson (Rtd) - moved to Eastern Synod June 2023

Revd Ruth Whitehead - moved to National Synod of Wales March 2023

CHANGES WITHIN THE SYNOD

Revd Colin Halstead (Baptist) - left role of Local Church Leader at Bedminster in May 2023

CHURCH CHANGES

Abbey Meads, Christ the Servant (UBM) - closed 1st April 2023

Upton Cheney - closed 3rd September 2023

Ilfracombe (UM) - closed 3rd September 2023

Plymouth Trinity - closed 30th September 2023

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South Western Synod of the United Reformed Church
Synod Meeting, October 2023

Report of the Synod Executive Committee

Contact: Revd Neil Thorogood (ministertthurc@gmail.com)

1. As you might expect, quite a bit of our time since the March meeting of Synod has been taken up with issues around the vacancy for the post of Synod Moderator. We continue to work with various people within the Synod and in the wider URC to move towards a nomination. In the meantime we are seeking the best ways to support Synod staff and the wider life of our churches during this extended vacancy.
2. Following the resolution passed at our March Synod, General Assembly endorsed the proposal that the Bristol Korean Church should be accepted as a church of the URC. We have welcomed Revd Yohan Song as the new minister for the Bristol Korean Church (URC) and have arranged suitable provision of housing for him and his family. We have also taken relevant action as other ministerial moves have taken place and hope to welcome new ministers and others when Synod meets.
3. We have continued to respond to applications for the variety of grants the Synod offers and are grateful for these opportunities to explore with local congregations some of the opportunities and challenges they face in developing their mission.
4. We have engaged with the relevant legal and financial processes as properties the Synod has responsibilities for have had works undertaken, been prepared for sale or sold. These have included Abbey Meads, Bath Central, Upton Cheyney and Elmore Road URCs.
5. The Executive has, with regret, received notice that three of our churches within the Synod have decided to close and have held closing services – Bedminster, Plymouth Trinity and Ilfracombe Emmanuel (UM). We give thanks for the faithful witness that these churches have given to their communities over the years.
6. The Executive have discussed Synod finances, including increases to grant packages and our contributions to wider URC funding issues, including pension provision. The Synod Treasurer will bring several items to the October Synod meeting.
7. The Executive wish to formally acknowledge the extraordinary work undertaken by the staff in the Synod office in support of our churches and by the networks of Synod committees, local ministers and church leaders, elders, Pastoral Advisors, Transition Ministers and others. It takes a lot of commitment from all of us to enable our Synod to not merely function, but to thrive. In the absence of our own Moderator, this means extra burdens fall upon many. We are deeply grateful.

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Pastoral Committee Report
October 2023

The Pastoral Committee recognizes the faithful service that goes on throughout the Synod in churches large and small, rural and urban, in United Reformed Churches and Local Ecumenical Partnerships, in churches with a reinvigorated sense of purpose and those feeling fragile. Together we acknowledge that the church is the body of our Christ and as we strive to express God's love, we are reminded to collectively take time to worship, to pray and to also receive God's love.

Church Changes

Churches that have closed since the last Synod Meeting are recorded in the Synod Executive report. We give thanks for these churches and the many lives they have enriched over the years.

We welcome the Bristol Korean Church, which was formally accepted as a URC church at General Assembly, following the recommendation of the South Western Synod.

Ministerial Movements

We welcome those who have moved into the Synod

Revd Jessica Ascroft-Townsley - moved into the Synod from the USA in June and commenced at Dawlish and Kingsteignton on a Certificate of Limited Service with an associated Synod role.

Mrs Claire Partridge - commenced as Synod Safeguarding Officer in August 2023

Revd Yohan Song - commenced at Bristol Korean Church

The new Methodist ministers

Revd Stephen Caddick - commenced at Braunton, Christ Church in September 2023

Revd Sharon Lovelock - commenced at Frampton Cotterell in September 2023

The new Baptist ministers

Revd Andy Pearce - commenced at Locking Castle in April 2023

And the new Local Church Leaders

Revd David Jewell - commenced at Wrington, Winscombe and Nailsea in July 2023

We wish every blessing for those moving out of this Synod

Revd Dr John Burgess (Rtd) - moved to West Midlands Synod July 2023

Revd Susan Durber (Rtd) - moved to National Synod of Wales March 2023

Revd Rowena Francis (Rtd) - moved to West Midlands Synod July 2023

Revd Peter Henderson (Rtd) - moved to Eastern Synod June 2023

Revd Vivien Henderson (Rtd) - moved to Eastern Synod June 2023

Revd Ruth Whitehead - moved to National Synod of Wales March 2023

And we note a change within the Synod

Revd Colin Halstead - left role of Local Church Leader at Bedminster in May 2023

As we journey through this extended period of Moderator vacancy, we are aware of the extra pressures this places on churches and individuals; we encourage your prayers and grace as we all strive in our varied ways to serve well.

URC South Western Synod
October 2023 meeting of Synod
Report from the Discipleship and Service Committee

Convener: Revd Neil Thorogood (email: ministerthurc@gmail.com)

1. The creation of this special meeting of Synod and the various elements within it have taken a significant part of the committee's time this year and we wish to record our thanks and appreciation to all involved. In particular, we are grateful to those who have offered workshops and those who have encouraged more people to attend. We record our great thanks to everyone involved at Westfield URC for hosting us. We hope and pray that this gathering will be an opportunity to celebrate the Synod's life and vitality and to discover resources that can work well in our own contexts. This feels a very important aspect of our collective encouragement and affirmation, not least in this period without a Moderator.
2. General Assembly in July 2023 reaffirmed the importance of pastoral supervision as a requirement for serving ministers. In the South West, we have always extended this to include local church leaders as well. We will continue to encourage and advocate for this and are glad that many are already receiving such supervision. In order to ease any financial pressures or concerns, **we are delighted that the Synod Executive has taken the decision that all pastoral supervision fees for ministers and local church leaders be reimbursed from now on by the Synod.** This removes any need for local churches to fund this, or for any support to be sought from central URC funds. We hope this will make the system easier to use and also affirms the Synod's commitment to pastoral supervision as an essential aspect of our wider life and work. Please make any claims for reimbursement from now on to the Synod Treasurer in the normal way, using the relevant claim form from the Synod website.
3. In relation to interfaith matters, we hold in our prayers the URC's Moderator of General Assembly, Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, as she joins an ecumenical visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in November. This has been organised by the Church of Scotland and the Methodist Church.
4. We are delighted that Revd Aiyana Gardner-Houghton is moving on from Education for Ministry Phase 2 (the first three years after ordination) as she continues her service in the Synod. We hope to be able to formally present Aiyana with her certificate at the meeting in October. We continue to support and pray for our own Synod Clerk, Rachel Leach, as her ordination training continues and look forward in due time as further candidates explore possibilities. It will be a joy that the Synod will be offering placement opportunities for current students in training at both Northern College, Manchester and Westminster College, Cambridge, in the coming months. We wish all involved well.

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Report to Synod on Budget and M&M and Pensions for 2024-6

The budget proposal for 2024 and beyond is based upon the planned donation to the URC Ministers' Pension Fund.

Making significant contributions to the Ministers' Pension Fund will cause us to show a deficit budget for the next several years.

It is important that we assure Synod that we can afford this. To put it into context, at this time we have investments of over £11 million and property assets of £5.6 million.

In our budgeting we also anticipate an increase in the closure rate of churches.
Our income

£ thousands	2023	2024	2025	2026
Investment Income	240	250	250	250
Rental Income	40	25	25	25
Interest on deposits	2	25	20	20
Capital from redundant properties	300	300	300	300
Additional property sales	0	400	400	400
Grants received	7.5	10	10	10
Training receipts	2.5	5	5	5
Sundry income	5	3	3	3
Totals	597	1018	1013	1013

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Our expenses

£ thousands	2023	2024	2025	2026
Special ministry	84	150	160	170
Synod Staff	200	200	210	220
Pastoral Advisors	45	48	50	52
Ecumenical Grants	5	6	6	6
Other grants	15	15	15	15
Property grants	100	200	200	200
Mission & Enabling grants	50	100	100	100
Resource sharing	25	50	50	50
Retired Ministers Pension	500	500	500	250
Training	10	5	5	5
Youth work	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Schools, retreats,	5	20	20	20
Safeguarding	10	10	10	10
Church Support	5	50	50	50
Synod & area costs	2.5	7.5	7.5	7.5
Office costs	18.5	25.5	25.5	25.5
Office rental	7	9	9	9
Synod Property	20	20	20	20
Investment property	10	20	20	20
Misc. fees	22	32	32	32
Total expenditure	1134	1478	1510	1282
Total income	597	1018	1013	1013
Surplus/deficit	-537	-460	-497	-269

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Resource sharing

We plan to offer £50,000 to the Inter Synod resource sharing to help some of our poorer Synods. The increase is due to less well-off Synod requesting more support.

Maintenance of the Ministry Fund

In 2022 we failed to meet our target largely due to churches facing challenging times with near total loss of lettings income. This has continued well into 2023, which has meant that the situation is not likely to be a great deal better in 2024.

The Synod makes up the contributions of churches that close. These usually come from assets of the church that closed, but in some cases from Synod funds.

For 2024 we are planning to contribute £1,100,000 to the central M&M fund. The factors affecting guided church contributions will not change.

Grants

It is planned to change the levels of some grants from the date of this Synod.

- Enabling grants
 - Small grants increased from £2,500 to £5,000.
 - Larger grants no change. Up to £25,000 or £5,000/year for up to 5 years.
- Property Grants
 - Requirement that all property grants are dependent upon a professional building survey having been carried out within 5 years of the grant application.
 - 10% grants are increased to 20% for URC Churches and Manses. If a Facelift grant is applied the first £40,000 of any expenditure is ignored. There is no upper limit.
 - 5% for United Churches are increased to 10%. If a Facelift grant is applied the first £40,000 of any expenditure is ignored. There is no upper limit.
 - Facelift Grants for URC Churches and manses are for 50% of costs up to £40,000. Thus the maximum facelift grant is now £20,000. Facelift grants are only permitted at least 5 years after a previous Facelift application.
 - Facelift grants for United Churches are for 25% of costs up to £40,000. Thus the maximum facelift grant is now £10,000. Facelift grants are only permitted at least 5 years after a previous Facelift application.
 - Survey grants and Asbestos survey grants are unchanged at 50% of the cost provided a copy is lodged with the Synod.
 - Feasibility Grants are unchanged at 50% of the costs but the maximum grant is increased to £5,000.
 - ECO grants for URC churches and manses remain at 50% of the costs, but the maximum grant is increased to £10,000.
 - ECO grants for United Churches remain at 25% of costs but the maximum grant is increased to £5,000.
 - AV grants for URC Churches to install or upgrade an Audio or Video system are based upon 50% of costs with a maximum grant of £10,000. For United church this is 25% of costs with a maximum grant of £5,000.

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Loans

- There is no change in the rules affecting church loans for building works. There is no set maximum level of loan, but the church must be able to show how it intends to repay a loan. A loan is normally expected to be repaid within 5 years. The cost is 1% above the Bank of England base rate and calculated upon a daily basis on the amount outstanding.
- Loans to ministers in order to facilitate the purchase of a car for pastoral purposes is increased to £7,500, and must be repaid within 5 years. The cost is 1% above the Bank of England base rate and calculated upon a daily basis on the amount outstanding.