

# South Western Synod

## Task Group on Synod Staffing

### Final Report to Synod Executive and Synod Meeting: February 2025

#### Task Group members:

Marie Trubic (Church Related Community Worker, Bridgwater & Cannington); David Downing (Moderator); Rachel Leach (Synod Clerk); Sue Cossey (Synod Pastoral Advisor, Bristol Area); Neil Thorogood (Minister at Thornbury & Trinity-Henleaze URCs, convenor Synod Discipleship & Service Committee)

#### Introduction:

In the latter part of 2023 and early 2024, the Synod Executive undertook a review of the Synod Pastoral Advisor (SPA) team and roles. We gladly affirmed just how significant, helpful and important the SPAs are. We also highlighted the workload they carry and the extent to which they were often in crisis-management mode without time and opportunity for wider pastoral support of our churches. This was intensified due to the vacancy for a Moderator. Building upon this review, the Discipleship and Service Committee brought the following resolutions to the synod meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2024:

- 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.**

These resolutions were passed, and the task group was established (joined by our new Moderator after his arrival). We have held extensive conversations as a group, reflecting upon current and emerging needs in local congregations and how best the synod might support these. We have consulted widely, inviting the other 12 URC synods to share their wisdom and experiences. We received very helpful and full responses from 7. We also sent a questionnaire to all of our synod's congregations, church leaders and ministers and received 22 replies. These responses have greatly influenced our recommendations. We have drawn upon collective experience and wisdom amongst those who know our synod well.

We were also very aware of wider issues. Our synod is well served by many people in a host of roles. But there are concerning ways in which gaps have emerged. We do not have nearly as much available staff time devoted to developing discipleship and growing leadership (lay and ordained) as many other Synods. Our uptake of ongoing ministerial training and development (Education for Ministry phase 3 funding) is the lowest in the URC. Whilst Stepwise is a gem and we are indebted to Roy Lowes and others for its profile, we have little focussed time and input specifically to support and encourage existing and new lay preachers at a point when congregations express growing need for more people to lead worship. We know that many congregations feel they are burdened with the increasing range of compliance demands, with little energy left for exciting mission activities and experiments. The absence of specific training roles means that our Synod does not easily connect to vital URC networks that support training and development. This gap becomes even more troubling given that the denomination-wide Church Life Review process is shifting training provision from central London staff to a collaboration between synods

and our Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs - Scottish College, Westminster College in Cambridge, Northern College in Manchester). Geographically, South Western is furthest from an RCL of any synod, and we risk missing out on much that might help us. We have almost no formal Synod-wide focus upon children and young people. The URC's Church Life Review is likely to bring significant suggestions and reform that will shape the future of denominational support for local churches at an extraordinary additional General Assembly in November 2025. Any plans we make as a synod need to be flexible enough to adapt to changing URC patterns as well as evolving local contexts in the South West. But, we believe, the need to act now where we can is very great indeed.

In the light of all of the above, the task group suggests the following three new areas of staffing, funded by the Synod (not through increased call upon local church funds). These three areas, we believe, can best equip us as a synod to support and enhance congregations in their own work and witness. These three areas can be implemented in ways that allow for flexibility and evolution as the needs of our local churches, wider URC changes and ecumenical realities shift and change.

## Area One: Synod Communications Role

It is essential that local churches can quickly find the most up to date information they need to help with a wide range of activity; everything from how to complete annual church returns to potential funding for local church staff to how to develop a building and explore ideas for evangelism. The list is endless. We believe that this requires us to put real effort into a constantly updated Synod website. Further, we believe we need to do better at sharing news, stories, testimonies, advice and best practice across our synod.

All of this highlights the need for dedicated staff time devoted to communications. Whilst much of this will be digital and online, we must not ignore the importance of printed matter as a key resource for some of us. We believe that such work probably amounts to around 15 hours/week.

This is an area that the Church Life Review may also offer URC-wide input for.

Our need is urgent. So, to avoid running the risk of creating a post and employing someone only to face significant changes if the November 2025 Church Life Review offers radical alternatives, the task group suggests that we contract with a suitable company to provide what we need. Such a contract is more open to alteration and termination if other URC solutions emerge. We know that the National Synod of Wales already has a fruitful contract with a company providing just these sorts of communication services. Our recommendation is that, in the first instance, we approach our friends in Wales to see if the company they employ might have scope to also work with South Western Synod. Failing that, we suggest we look to other such providers.

### RESOLUTION ONE:

**South Western Synod, meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2025, agrees to enhance its communications by seeking a contract with a suitable organisation or company as outlined in the staffing task group's report. Any such contract to include a suitable review process in the light of experience and as synod requirements and Church Life Review outcomes evolve.**

## Area Two: Administration Support

One of the most popular requests from the local church questionnaire was for support in administration. This includes:

- Bookkeeping help with church accounts
- Compliance – returns and DBS
- Health and Safety
- Human Resources advice and policies (some will come from Church House)
- Buildings

We are proposing a full-time post to support churches with some routine administration, thus freeing them for mission activity.

This role would be someone who can work alongside churches to both get their governance up to date (where this is needed) and then to assist in maintenance of admin work. We envisage this person will build their knowledge so that they can be a connection point for local church leadership, pointing them in the right direction for their needs. They will also build church confidence as a reassuring non-anxious presence for elders. It's likely that the person may be able to handle some work from Synod office staff that is beyond current capacity.

Our expectation is that this role will be very large at the start as churches need a lot of support, then moves to a maintenance function for the majority of work. Therefore, we are suggesting that once the role is filled, it is trialled on one Synod area (possibly Bristol) to get this area up to date, and then roll out over the next few months to all areas. This allows for building up good processes and not getting initially overwhelmed. There may be a need to firefight at other churches during roll out if a crisis.

This role does not need to be tied to an area – could contact by phone / email etc, and thus we suggest it will be based in Synod Office with suitable scope for homeworking as well.

We understand that the Church Life Review may also offer some administration help, but need for this help is high and so we should go ahead now.

Proposed Role description:

**Full Title:** South Western Synod Local Church Admin Support

**Hours:** full time – 37 hours per week

**Salary:** to be approved by Synod Executive. The role is open to lay individuals

**Location:** based in Synod Office, with possibility of travelling to areas on occasion when needed.

**Purpose:** to alleviate the burden of compliance and governance on local churches by taking on routine tasks that are beyond the capacity of the local church.

1. Assisting local churches and encouraging them to be confident in complying with URC and charity governance requirements
2. Collaborating fully with Local churches, Synod office staff and officers, together with Synod Pastoral advisors and Mission and Learning Mentors (see below) to help churches fulfil their potential and the Synod to sustain compliance
3. Engaging appropriately with Church House staff to make sure processes are compliant and efficient
4. Supporting and encouraging local church leadership (elders, local church leaders, ministers) and building confidence

**Tasks:** an indicative list of areas of work could include:

- A. Finance – helping congregations complete financial reporting for end of year and reports to Synod
- B. Compliance – assisting churches with annual returns for Synod / Church House; compliance with safeguarding, health and safety requirements,
- C. Health and Safety policies and procedures
- D. Buildings – including maintenance, quinquennials etc
- E. HR – though some may come through developments with Church Life Review
- F. Helping churches and Synod staff to develop more efficient ways of working (as knowledge builds and best practice emerges)
- G. Being a contact for queries, pointing enquirers to the most appropriate person.

## Resolution Two:

### Part A

South Western Synod, meeting on 8th March 2025, agrees to create a new full-time post for admin support for churches. This post to fulfil the role description as outlined in the staffing task group's report.

### Part B

Synod authorises the Synod Executive to oversee the creation of a suitable appointment pack (to include details of terms and conditions, job description, person specification etc.) and to advertise, interview and appoint for the post as soon as is practical.

## Area Three: Mission and Learning Mentors (x 5)

The task group recommends that we create five new part time posts to complement the existing five Synod Pastoral Advisors in the five geographical areas they cover (Cornwall, Plymouth and North Devon area; Devon South and East area; Somerset area; Bristol area; Swindon, Wiltshire and Wiltshire United area). These Mission and Learning Mentors (MLMs) would work in close collaboration with their area's SPA and, together, the team of ten SPAs and MLMs would develop a collegiate structure to support local congregations and work alongside the Moderator and others to sustain existing church life and develop fresh opportunities and initiatives for outreach, mission, worship and discipleship.

We offer this idea to Synod, appreciating that it needs further discussion and consultation. Different possibilities could come from it. An individual might wish to take on both SPA and MLM role in an area. Someone might want to cover the MLM role in two adjacent areas. Synod Executive is particularly keen for the relationship between SPAs and MLMs to be clarified; how do their roles connect without duplication and how do we maximise the fresh resource such posts create and the benefit for SPAs?

The current SPA job descriptions include two areas of work that might become the heart of the role of these new MLMs. These are: co-ordinating education and learning in the area; offering support and encouragement to churches developing their mission, especially at times of transition. This will free up SPA time (a vital goal coming out of the SPA review) for the ongoing pastoral and support work across the churches of their area that is meant to be fundamental to the SPA role. It will dramatically increase our synod's attention to and resourcing of learning and discipleship with a clear attention to local contexts; not a one-size-fits-all approach, but a bespoke devotion to what a specific congregation might need at a given moment in its life.

Why ‘mentors’? This is more than playing with language. A mentor is someone with the skills, experience, responsibilities and authority to walk alongside a church or individuals for a time, helping them to develop a piece of work or set of resources that will enhance their life and service in Christ. Mentoring is highly adaptable and flexible. Its emphasis is upon enabling and equipping others so that, when the time is right, the mentor can step back and let those they work with continue with new confidence and relevant skills. A mentor will have awareness of a host of resources (hence the need for collaboration with others in the role and beyond our synod) but will always want to listen really well and understand what it is that a local situation might find useful. Mentoring draws upon the skills of the mentor but also demands that the mentor remains a learner as well, sharing a journey of discovery and growing with those they offer support to.

We suggest that these new Mission and Learning Mentors be employed at 10 hours/week (25% full time equivalent) to mirror the current SPA roles. We want to build in from the start the reality that SPA and MLM are equal partners in supporting an area of our synod. We can imagine that, subject to suitable location and qualities, an individual might be employed in two adjacent MLM roles, creating a 50% job.

It will be essential that one of these five MLMs include in their job description very explicitly joining in with the current URC-wide Training and Development Officer network and being a channel of communication for such areas of work (filling a key current gap for us).

To clarify all that the task group sees in these new roles, we offer the following role description:

- Full Title:** South Western Synod Mission and Learning Mentor
- Hours:** 10 hours/week, offered flexibly to fit local church need
- Salary:** to be approved by Synod Executive. The role is open to lay or ordained individuals
- Location:** based in each of the Synod’s existing pastoral areas with ability to travel to any churches in that area and, when necessary, more widely
- Purpose:** in collaboration with a Synod Pastoral Advisor, to share in stimulating, supporting and encouraging growth in worship, witness and discipleship across their area by:
1. Assisting local churches in their mission and in implementing mission initiatives by walking alongside them for a suitable time to enhance work and witness locally
  2. Engaging appropriately with initiatives across the Synod, within the wider URC and with ecumenical partners and organisations that can benefit local congregations
  3. Supporting and encouraging local church leadership (elders, local church leaders, ministers) through training and development opportunities
- Tasks:** an indicative list of areas of work includes:
- A. Mission-enabling – working with local churches on strategies and resources with a particular remit to look at developing discipleship (lifelong learning) and creative use of local church resources (people, buildings, networks, relationships)
  - B. Helping local churches develop ideas and strategies, including support for funding initiatives and applications to Synod and other grant-making bodies
  - C. Alongside supporting existing churches and their work, identifying pioneering possibilities for new ways of being church locally
  - D. Providing training events and resources effectively in response to the express needs of local churches and areas, including encouragement for elders, lay preachers, local church leaders, ministers and CRCWs (including EM2 and EM3 provision)

- E. Helping local churches and their leadership to find and use suitable resources for worship and witness (from the URC and beyond)
- F. Responding to need and opportunity in their area by walking alongside a local congregation for a suitable time, enhancing existing gifts and experience and then moving on to fresh work in another part of the area

### **Resolution Three:**

#### **Part A**

South Western Synod, meeting on 8th March 2025, agrees in principle to create five new part time posts of Mission and Learning Mentor, one in each existing Synod pastoral area. These posts to fulfil the role description as outlined in the staffing task group's report and as developed through further consultation.

#### **Part B**

Synod asks the Synod Executive to ensure suitable consultation with the existing SPA team in order to clarify exactly how these new roles will work with the SPAs to enhance Synod support for local churches.

#### **Part C**

Synod Meeting invites Local churches to send any reflections on these MLM proposals that they wish the Synod Executive to consider to Revd Neil Thorogood ([ministerthurc@gmail.com](mailto:ministerthurc@gmail.com)) by Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May.

#### **Part D**

Subject to the outcomes of B and C (above), Synod authorises the Synod Executive, at its meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025, to take the next appropriate steps up to and including recruitment for these five MLM posts.