

Discussion about Pastoral Committee's proposals on deployment in the Synod

John Waione: 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 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: *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.*

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, 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

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 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 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 some of the pain and the hurt that is around - we've heard some of that and I am grateful that I am part of a Synod conversation in which that is honoured and

the pain is heard and can be heard. I would like to reflect on a couple of things, one is, and I wear a few of the scars of this, because for a while I was the principal of a theological college, and as you can see, we're working really well there and generating vast numbers of students for you! That was thrown at us a few times. I've been conscious that in there are moments in the life of the URC where it can feel as if there is a situation of us and them – and that there are some people making life hard for other people. And I have always thought that the URC is at its best when we recognise that there isn't and us and them there is only us, and I recognise that those who are serving in our structures are doing so they feel that is what God has called them to do and now is a really, really hard time to do that just as now is a really hard time to serve in an elders' meeting or indeed to be in ministry. I'm grateful that we're trying to hold this together as we're all in it together and the pain is real for us all.

The other thing I would like to reflect on very briefly is my sense of seasons. I left Westminster college and returned to pastorate because I had a profound sense that what God was saying to me was that this season of your ministry has come to an end. This season at Westminster is ending and I have a new season that I need you to enter. If you look at paper A1 that is going to the March Mission Council, you'll see that it is a paper about the fact that we are in a very, very tough season in the life of our denomination. We didn't invent this season, we didn't create it and I don't believe that we have created the situation we are in by being a bunch of faithless, or foolish people. We are in a situation that has come upon us much like the pandemic, much as those who in ministry when war was declared had to face that season. We didn't go looking for this. I think it is a season when God is saying to us, some of the things that you have held dear simply no longer work - and that is hard. And I hope and pray that together, not just in this Synod, but across the denomination, we can find ways to walk in this season with the same sense of faithfulness that our predecessors did when they said that we can no longer be part of the national church and a new season is beginning. I hope that we can find that and hope we can continue to pray for those who have got to lead us into it and it's a blessing to hear some of that today.

RW: Thank you Neil.

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